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ABSTRACT

This book contains nine chapters, by various authors, containing research and policy perspectives on issues of mutual obligation between teachers and students, especially in Australia. The following are included: (1) "Researching Literacy, Language, and Numeracy and Mutual Obligation: An Introduction to Some Issues" (Sheilagh Kelly and Liz Campbell); (2) "Voices of the Unemployed" (Patrick Gurr); (3) "The All-Seeing Eye: A Stakeholder Narrative of Applying for the Dole" (Michael Chin); (4) "Mutual Obligation: How to Survive and Enjoy the Experience" (Sue Frischke); (5) "Stakeholders' Experiences of Mutual Obligation" (Pauline O'Maley); (6) "LANT (Literacy and Numeracy Training) and the Country Learner: A City Slicker's Perspective" (John Stone); (7) "Mutual Obligation: Who's Paying? (Philippa Granwal); (8) "Mandatory Participation in Literacy/Numeracy Programs for Unemployed Young Australians: Whose Interests Are Served?" (Sarah Lindfield-Ide); and (9) "Researching Mutual Obligation and Literacy, Language, and Numeracy: What Does This Research Tell Us? (Sheilagh Kelly and Liz Campbell). An appendix contains a questionnaire sent to providers and participants asking about mutual obligation; and a bibliography lists 155 references. (KC)

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Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium

Pebbles in a Pond

Learner, teacher, and policy perspectives on Mutual Obligation

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Pebbles in a Pond: Learner, teacher, and policy perspectives on Mutual Obligation

Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium
(ALNARC)

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Foreword

Sue Shore

Director, ALNARC (SA)

University of South Australia

In comparison to many other countries, Australia has a surprisingly strong reputation for government-funded research into issues of theory, policy, and practice in adult language, literacy, and numeracy provision. The projects in this collection provide one example of the rich diversity of research that is being produced from one network of researchers here in Australia.

The Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium (ALNARC) is funded by ANTA through DETYA to promote the development of a visible research culture. An important aspect of this work involves mentoring and promoting the work of teacher-researchers in local contexts, asking questions about practice and building a body of published work that can be shared amongst people concerned to maintain a critical edge in their thinking about policy and practice.

In these projects, practitioner research is a mode of inquiry that explores the complexities of policy and provision and, at the same time, keeps the inquiry process open-work in progress as it were-cognisant of the demands of organisational policy and funding mandates, and aware of the shifting nature of learners and learning.

Undertaking this kind of research is challenging. It involves asking questions about practice-questions that are not necessarily valued widely because they challenge the efficacy of funding and structural support for the learners in programs under investigation. Such research also involves asking uncomfortable questions about one's own practice. Moreover, these questions sometimes point to a dissonance between university-based researcher knowledge about learning and those interests and knowledges of locally based practitioners. There is ample scope for learning for all involved in the process when practitioner research is approached from this perspective.

The teacher-researchers, learners, mentors, and community/industry participants are to be congratulated for their efforts and for making this contribution to Australian research a possibility, especially when the labour involved in research is rarely built in to the practical realities of their teaching lives.

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of these papers have appeared in State ALNARC publications documenting local programs. Papers by Patrick Gurr, Michael Chin, Pauline O'Maley, and Philippa Granwal are printed in *Issues arising in the implementation of LANT: the literacy numeracy training option in the Mutual Obligation Scheme for the unemployed*, produced by the New South Wales Centre of ALNARC, University of Technology, Sydney. Papers by Sue Frischke, John Stone, and Sarah Lindfield-Ide are printed in ALNARC SA: *Report on the 1999 South Australian program*, edited by Sue Shore, Ruth Trenerry, and Liz Campbell, University of South Australia, Underdale.

The ALNARC Editorial Committee oversaw the publication of these papers. The committee consisted of Jenny McGuirk, Betty Johnston, Sheilagh Kelly, Sue Shore, Ruth Trenerry, and Liz Campbell. Final editorial work on this collection was carried out by Melanie Coombe, a professional editor.

ALNARC would like to acknowledge funding support from the Spencer Foundation for mentoring for the three South Australian projects through the Practitioner Research Communication and Mentoring Project, which was managed by Sue Shore, University of South Australia during 1999-2000.

ALNARC is funded under the ANTA Adult Literacy National Project by the Commonwealth of Australia through the Department of Education, Training, and Youth Affairs.

Contributors

Liz Campbell is a sessional lecturer in vocational preparation (ESL, literacy, and women's studies) at the Adelaide Institute of TAFE. She has also undertaken research with the University of South Australia under the Spencer Foundation adult literacy project.

Michael Chin is an academic who works as a casualised contract worker in the tertiary education sector in New South Wales.

Sue Frischke teaches literacy and numeracy at the Spencer Institute of TAFE, Whyalla Campus, in South Australia.

Philippa Granwal is a practitioner researcher in New South Wales.

Patrick Gurr is a practitioner researcher based in New South Wales who tutors students involved in the Mutual Obligation Initiative.

Sheilagh Kelly is the Co-Director of ALNARC (NSW) and lectures at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Sarah Lindfield-Ide worked at the Torrens Institute of TAFE in South Australia while completing the research for her paper.

Pauline O'Maley, a former ALBE teacher based in New South Wales, is currently undertaking doctoral studies that examine ideological frameworks underpinning programs such as LANT.

John Stone is a South Australian-based private training consultant with J & B Stone.

1 Researching literacy, language, and numeracy and Mutual Obligation: an introduction to some issues

Sheilagh Kelly and Liz Campbell

Introduction

Literacy and numeracy education programs for unemployed teenagers and older Australians were introduced under the 'Working Nation' policy of the Federal Keating Labor Government. Such programs, which were initially offered in TAFE institutes and then to all registered providers of accredited literacy and numeracy curriculum, provided pre-vocational training for adults, young and old, who were in need of literacy and numeracy skills development prior to their accessing vocational training or seeking employment. The idea of literacy training for jobseekers has been collapsed by the current Federal Howard Liberal – Coalition Government into a range of training options under the principle of 'mutual obligation'. This shift in policy reconceptualises training as the individual responsibility of the unemployed person. At the government's policy launch, it was suggested that it was 'fair and reasonable' to require those in receipt of support to 'put something back' into the community. This initiative requires unemployed people to take up training and learning responsibilities in reciprocation for government financial support.

The Mutual Obligation Initiative targets unemployed people to take part in a mutual obligation activity, which can be literacy and numeracy training, known as LANT. Other activities include 'Work for the Dole', community development employment projects, voluntary work, 'Green Corps', or other training or assistance programs. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the new arrangements that lead to a client's opting for literacy and numeracy training have given rise to a complex set of roles and relationships between the three main stakeholders involved – Centrelink staff, registered training providers, and the LANT mutual obligation clients themselves. For many Centrelink staff, it has required new awareness, knowledge, and judgements about appropriate referral to literacy/numeracy training. For a significant number of training providers, the program is not merely a new mechanism for funding but represents a different undertaking for them: for example, it is the first time that a number of providers have been involved in an educational enterprise. The initiative also appears to be having a significant impact on the professional practice of literacy and numeracy teachers in terms of curricula, resources, teaching methods, assessment demands, job security, and ethical issues related to their role vis-à-vis the compulsory nature of attendance. For the clients or students, a complicated set of procedures

has been added to the process of applying for unemployment benefits along with an often limited choice of mutual obligation activities.

At the time when this research was undertaken, the Mutual Obligation Initiative had been in operation for approximately one year. ALNARC believes it is an appropriate time to begin evaluating the impact of such significant social policy shifts. This collection brings together research projects by a range of practitioners with the aim of developing a visible research culture among practitioners.

This chapter looks at some of the contextual issues of the research and introduces the projects by a brief review. It then considers some of the constraints that practitioners have encountered of being involved in doing research and specific challenges to ALNARC's aim of fostering such research.

Aims and background

A chief aim of the ALNARC project is to extend debate about literacy, language, and numeracy (LLN) provision and the challenges produced by shifts to the government policy, which frames LLN provision. An environment of increasing regulation of educators' work makes it difficult for practitioners to speak out about issues that affect provision from their own perspectives and on behalf of students. Regulation constraints include the introduction of national curricula, submission-based provision linked to government employment targets, and increasing casualisation of staff (Shore, Trenerry, and Campbell 2000, 2).

Through the development of small-scale, localised, mentored research projects, ALNARC aims to foster a culture of research among practitioners to ensure that practitioners' voices are not lost in the shifts in provision and to encourage debate about and critique of those shifts. The ALNARC project also seeks to investigate aspects of effective and responsive literacy and numeracy provision for groups with identified special needs or circumstances in the face of a changing policy environment. National publication of papers by practitioner researchers is intended to support the development of a culture of research and debate by publicising challenges in the research process and, more broadly, to LLN practice and provision. The rationale for engaging practitioners in research has been validated as both an effective means of professional development and a way to generate new knowledge (Burns and Hood 1995).

Practitioner interest in developing research projects was encouraged initially through an expression of interest process and then through workshops, which were designed to initiate small-scale projects and canvas research methods that researchers might use as well as the mentoring process that would be put in place. All the projects were mentored by experienced researchers. Some projects involved collaboration between practitioner researchers and research mentors. All have had their findings produced in State ALNARC reports. This collection represents seven of the research projects.

We chose a qualitative approach to the investigation of the experiences of the various stakeholders, in the belief that this method would most effectively

reveal issues of concern in the implementation of the Mutual Obligation Initiative. Data generated by these projects is diverse: it comprises tape-recorded, semi-structured interviews, informal discussions accompanied by notes for mnemonic assistance in later narrative construction, survey questionnaires, statistical analysis, and literature produced by a range of government agencies in respect of LLN provision and the Mutual Obligation Initiative and analysed discursively. Case sites for research include the practitioner's own or another teacher's current LANT program at local centres and, in one instance, a Centrelink agency. Research sites are both urban and regional and thus include examples of teaching and researching special needs in rural and remote circumstances. The economic uncertainty which exists in regional Australia makes it all the more imperative to ensure that training programs work creatively to deliver flexible and relevant employment opportunities.

The collection has a focus on unemployment with emphasis on particular aspects of the Mutual Obligation Initiative. Several projects examine aspects of individual stakeholder experiences in the operation of the Literacy and Numeracy Training (LANT) option of the Mutual Obligation Initiative. In particular, the relations between Centrelink, the educational providers, and the students are investigated. Another considers the processes of student referral at a centre. Yet another analyses some of the assumptions underlying the Mutual Obligation Initiative. The papers are arranged to move from the specific and localised experiences of individual stakeholders through issues of classroom practice to macro and structural dimensions of the initiative (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 From the Individual to Policy

Practitioner researchers and their projects

In Chapter Two, Patrick Gurr, a TAFE educator, narrates aspects of the life history of one of his students to foreground the issues that face LANT learners. The research combines memory work, oral history, and narrative reconstruction. From his position as narrator, Gurr is able to incorporate as a parallel narrative some concerns about flexible provision and the constraints on student-based learning under the Mutual Obligation Initiative.

Michael Chin, in Chapter Three, documents his own experiences of applying for unemployment benefits as a casualised professional. His analysis of his own encounters with Centrelink point to the disparities between the self-empowering rhetoric of responsibility of the Mutual Obligation Initiative and the positioning of clients as deficit. His examination of the invasive processes involved in compliance with the requirements of the initiative argues that the relationship between clients, Centrelink, and Job Network member organisations represents an extension of coercive state practices, which are designed to manufacture client cooperation and shift attention from systemic causes of unemployment.

Sue Frischke focuses in Chapter Four on the reflections and responses that students enrolled in a LANT program have brought to bear on their own learning processes and potential. The economic environment in Whyalla is depressed, and generational unemployment is common. Her paper documents the challenges and successes of her literacy and numeracy teaching. Frischke argues that any response to the learning needs of the LANT student population must involve lateral thinking and flexibility. She suggests that course content needs to be relevant to young jobseekers, particularly those in the 15 – 18-year-old age group, which has been deemed youth at risk. To that end, she discusses the outcomes when literacy and numeracy training is integrated with vocational skills training. She argues strongly for the importance of developing personal and social skills as an integral part of the students' training.

In Chapter Five, Pauline O'Maley's project addresses the changing face of both teacher and learner experiences in LANT programs in the face of broader socioeconomic and political change. Drawing on data collected by other practitioner researchers involved in the ALNARC project, O'Maley looks at constructions of adult literacy as a passport to employment in a climate of increasing economic rationalism and emphasis on vocationalism. She argues that two themes emerge strongly from the case studies: the influence of the culture of the classroom and its practices on student learning and structural and systemic constraints that potentially hinder that learning. She indicates that positive learning outcomes have been experienced in classrooms in which the culture fosters positive attitudes, flexibility, student-focused and individualised learning plans, and smaller groups. But she notes that success depends on a range of factors, such as the maintenance of a supportive environment that is proactive about student success and incorporates consideration of all the issues that influence students' lives, as well as teacher experience, especially to coordinate a

flexible approach and to build cohesive group relations. O'Maley identifies a number of constraints to effective learning, including restricted outcomes, the compulsory nature of training with its lack of choice, and changes to the teaching role. This latter involves a shift towards teachers as brokers with Centrelink and as promoters and policers of training programs. Administration by teachers has also increased, which has put pressure on teacher resources. Distance provision and changes to student demographics, with increased numbers of Youth Allowance recipients in LANT programs, have demanded further shifts in literacy and numeracy provision that teachers must address. She concludes with some suggestions for future directions in the research agenda.

John Stone profiles a group of learners in a rural-based LANT program. Chapter Six documents his investigation of the availability of employment opportunities in the region and offers suggestions and strategies aimed at producing positive results for the participants in his program. He examines, from a regional perspective, the constraints and limitations as well as the opportunities that exist in the LANT program. Employment opportunities for students in the area are severely restricted by the nature of the businesses, which are highly automated, may be one-person enterprises or small family businesses that employ only family members and/or rely on seasonal employment such as fruit picking. In order to enhance the employment opportunities of students, it has been necessary to relate the content of their training program to their non-academic skills and to the competencies demanded by industry. One of the best ways to teach these students, most of whom share a background of academic failure and dysfunctional social relationships, has been to move out of the classroom and to teach by constructing individual programs that meet and develop the students' strengths. His reflection on the content of the training program, the students' learning outcomes, and the teacher's experiences in trying to maintain the interest of participants provides a commentary on the LANT program in terms of its application and its usefulness.

Philippa Granwal, in Chapter Seven, examines the issue of payment for LANT provision by TAFE while students have case management through private Job Network organisations. Her research is framed by State government cuts to TAFE providers and a change in student demographics. She considers the additional role that TAFE staff are being urged to take on to assist TAFE to become self-supporting. Clarification sought by TAFE of fee payment to training providers by Job Network agencies raised questions about TAFE's monitoring of referrals and suggested that covert referral by Job Network organisations might be taking place. The paper discusses her findings of a relationship between this referral issue, the omission of formal assessment of students by trained assessors, and the availability of referral information from Job Network organisations, particularly about formal registration of students with these agencies.

The final research paper is Sarah Lindfield-Ide's investigation of how the 'literacy crisis' has been incorporated into government policy for young unemployed people with training needs in literacy and numeracy. Chapter Eight

documents the antecedents of this literacy and numeracy labour market program and the policy underlying the Mutual Obligation Initiative. The research was carried out during the early months of the LANT program and represents a snapshot of this time of policy change. Her fieldwork collected data from both providers and participants. The data suggests that there is an unemployment crisis rather than a literacy crisis. The paper argues that a coherent national literacy and numeracy policy is needed, which is linked to initiatives in employment, training, and general education. This policy needs to broaden the spectrum of literacy provision to include, in particular, oral communication skills, basic computer skills, and critical literacy. There is also an urgent need for more funding for adult learning, especially in the light of a survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which has found that older people have literacy and numeracy problems, even though many of them are in employment.

Constraints on the research

Many problems have been encountered in the process of mentoring work with practitioners to foster a culture of research, including tight time lines, the extent of mentoring required to bring individual projects to completion, and personal problems of some researchers. In the case of regional practitioners, distance had an effect on the planning for, and structure of, the mentoring. Working alone or in isolated conditions, for instance, made some researchers feel more vulnerable. To overcome these problems and facilitate progress, a shift in most instances to more labour-intensive contact with practitioners has helped. In one project, a member of the mentoring team collected data from the designated site. In another project, the data was gathered by a practitioner researcher but was analysed and critiqued by an experienced research assistant.

An area for concern in the development of a critical research culture is the way in which some practitioners have experienced a process of 'silencing' at a number of different levels. We became aware that there were teachers and others who would have liked to become involved but felt constrained by their institutions not to participate. Others attended workshops but made it clear that they could not speak freely on sensitive issues. For example, one potential teacher-researcher withdrew from the project because she felt her tenure as a casual teacher was in jeopardy after her superior expressed a negative response to involvement in the project.

A different kind of silence lay in the inevitable gaps in the research topics taken up, including an absence of any specific focus on numeracy and an absence of research into ways in which curriculum might be developed to help teachers caught up in very challenging classroom demands.

Future research may need to address the issue of documenting practice, another constraining feature of this project. As Shore, Trenerry, and Campbell suggest (2000: 2), the requirement for practitioners to produce a paper from their research findings has not been easily applied to a group of researchers with such diverse backgrounds and capacity for documentation.

Conclusion

These research projects suggest that, in the face of a growing disparity between those who have access to resources and those who have not, the mutual obligation equation requires some balancing from the side of government. A practical response would be a greater commitment by government to the creation of job and training opportunities for the unemployed, especially in rural areas.

Several projects indicate that there is ground for some tentative optimism based on feedback from some of the students, who seemed to have benefited from their participation in these programs. Other students' needs are not being met, however, by the implementation of the Mutual Obligation Initiative. These clients are at risk of falling through the gaps in provision or of being repelled by coercive or inflexible practices. The enhancement of their employment prospects represents a separate matter for consideration and cannot be assumed as an outcome of the initiative.

Given the small-scale nature of this research, it is not possible to make conclusive generalisations about the success of this initial ALNARC project to foster a culture of research and debate. It is important to record, however, that at the national ALNARC forum in Melbourne in February 2000, findings from these projects were informally verified by participants around Australia. This verification suggests that there is a need for practitioner research collections, such as this one, to stimulate debate and encourage critique of the changing field.

2 Voices of the unemployed

Patrick Gurr

In this paper, Patrick Gurr, a practitioner researcher, reconstructs the story of one of his LANT students who is a client of the Mutual Obligation Initiative. The student account offers an insight into the diverse experience he brings to the program and, subsequently, some of his specific needs as a client. The issues raised echo Patrick's reflections on the increasing void between educators and learners and the opportunity for more personalised interaction provided by practitioner research.

Introduction

Caught up with the global push towards casualisation are TAFE teachers who are forced to account for their time in ways that leave little or no time to listen and reflect on what their students have to say. This paper is about one of those lives and the mechanism of research, which has given me the opportunity to take back the time to listen to the voices of adult students.

Who are our students? Often, our initial interview jottings contain fragmented and dislocated information from which we make deductions and assumptions, which are challenged when we develop relationships with the students – their diverse backgrounds, their journeys to LANT classes, their reasons for attending, influences and contexts, hopes and fears. Finding a starting point from which to begin teaching adult basic education – in whatever form – means negotiating with each student and can vary enormously.

Education, which is ongoing and unfolding, requires reciprocal understanding and a high degree of improvisation. Teachers are in the lives of our students and they are in ours. Ideally, TAFE teachers need to be located as those who care about their students' specific needs and can offer potentially a safety net, a way (back) into Australian society for the dispossessed and marginalised.

But increasingly, adult educators are constrained by time, resources, and teaching loads as well as the expectations of government programs like LANT and how it represents and assists its clients. The tools of assessment and the achievement of competencies used to gauge progress bear little relationship to the life stories and personal issues that are the context to students' attendance at LANT classes – issues like health problems, addiction, and loss of self-esteem due to forced redundancy from employment. One of my concerns is that market principles applied to adult education (in the context of the Mutual Obligation Initiative) impersonalises it. Another is the flexibility of programs like LANT given students' different needs. An important dimension of adult education

practice for me is how to maintain personalised interaction in the face of changes to government policy and its effects on provision.

This is where practitioner research created a space for me to reflect on the problems, choices, and decisions – sometimes disturbing – that are part of the daily lives of LANT students whom I teach. One of my students agreed to be part of my research project, to tell me more about himself, to help me use his oral history to piece together a narrative that demonstrates some of the issues that a flexible adult education system needs to take into account.

This story evolved from a series of informal interviews – friendly discussions, really – at a range of settings. During the conversations, I took some notes, which later assisted me to reconstruct the narrative from the student's oral history. Occasionally, I noted directly some parts of the student's speech. My notes were not transcriptions, however, but mnemonic aids. I also made note of several concerns that the student had about the process of reconstruction. He felt considerable unease about writing in general. The narrative tries to reflect these concerns in the form it takes as well as in the choice of material that I have selected to include.

The story is about a student who is part of a group that had been deemed by their case managers as 'requiring training' prior to their rejoining the workforce. Whether it is truly optional or not, this group obligingly attend the Literacy and Numeracy Training (LANT) Program as their Mutual Obligation activity. The student, who has here the pseudonym 'Paul', indicated in a frighteningly off-hand way that he was considering removing himself from the system permanently. He agreed to speak at length to me about why he felt that way.

I subsequently spent some time with 'Paul' listening to his account of his life over many cups of tea. Using the notes that I took during our talks, I have reconstructed a third-person biography of Paul's work history as well as some of the personal issues that have shaped that history, which help to explain why he is part of the LANT group. I have chosen to include Paul's voice as a commentary on the narrative by inserting direct quotations from our discussions. I decided on this form so Paul's perspective could be central but also to respect his concern about writing. Clearly, I am the narrator and writer but Paul's voice and figure is foregrounded. Paul's story may not be typical and may not make comfortable reading. He spoke with humour and honesty and occasionally with a depth of emotion that caused us both to falter.

Without a safety net

Paul arrived in Sydney in 1984 on his 750cc Honda motorbike. He had ridden from Brisbane to take over the lease on his mother's rented unit. She was returning to Queensland. Paul's parents had divorced when he was ten. Now aged twenty-three, he was going to try his luck in the big city.

Initially he made good; his self-perceived literacy and numeracy shortcomings did not prevent him from getting a factory job. The company

produced a rubber compound used to fill cracks in concrete roads and car parks and the decks on the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

After two years, Paul was offered another job with a company on the same industrial estate. This one offered more interest and variety because it involved sterilising and fumigating goods that were imported into Australia. The service rendered all manner of objects and items safe for use – from cricket bats to fruit – by chemically treating consignments and the containers in which they arrived. Paul's knowledge about pharmaceuticals also grew. The company supplied a range of products that included worming tablets for dogs, eye ointment for cattle, and anti-depressants for humans.

For the next seven years, Paul hid his limited reading and writing skills by forming a reciprocal relationship with another employee. By electing to work with another person, Paul could avoid much of the writing associated with work. Unfortunately, the agreement was not amicable due to personality differences, but Paul saw this unpleasantness as part of the price he had to pay for his lack of education. On this, Paul said: 'I really regret not being able to read and write; it makes me feel worthless and useless.'

These feelings of lack of worth increased to despair in 1993 when Paul, after a series of medical tests, was diagnosed as suffering from Crohn's disease. The disease affects the last part of the small intestine and is seriously debilitating, which restricted Paul's prospects.

At work, Paul had regularly refused offers to gain experience in other departments that would lead to promotion. He felt comfortable where he was and reluctant to place himself in a situation where his lack of education might be revealed. Although it was not satisfying, his job did not hold the terrors of report writing and other paperwork entailed in the continued offers of promotion. To stay put was, he felt, the lesser of two evils. The frustration of feeling unable to take up the training necessary to be a supervisor, however, and the effects of his illness became a source of great anxiety. Paul said:

> *The way others saw me wasn't the way I saw me. Looking back, coming to Sydney wasn't such a great idea. I felt like an alien, an outcast. I gave up caring. I blamed everybody except myself for the missed opportunities. I blamed my school and my parents. If I'd had a decent education things might have been different. They took me out of Grade 2 and put me in a special school, an 'opportunity school'. They said I had a hearing problem. I don't. I was just shy and introverted and I'm still a bit of a loner.*

Paul became increasingly depressed, left his job, and began to drift. His sense of powerlessness and isolation caused his personal relationships to suffer and fail. After spending his savings and then his superannuation, he had periods of work and of claiming benefits. His brief periods of employment evaporated as he lost interest. Spells of work as a forklift and delivery driver were interrupted by the need for treatment, and eventually, he stopped work completely. Paul was cut off from benefits for not applying for jobs. Paul said:

They wanted an arm's length of jobs that I'd applied for, but I didn't care any more. It seemed to me that the issue wasn't that I'm not out there looking for work but why wasn't I?

Money, Paul came to believe, was the answer to his problems. Wealth was an indication of success. In order to accumulate some cash, he sold all of his possessions of any worth. Paul said: 'I put all of the money on a footytab bet. I knew I wasn't going to win but it was a try, a last resort – you know?'

On the evening of 4 March 1999, Paul took what he thought was enough sleeping pills to end his life. It was an attempt made because he felt continually ashamed and embarrassed by his lack of education. Paul said:

I felt different from everyone else, not normal. I was tired of feeling that someone would find out about me, that I couldn't read or spell properly. I felt guilty like a murderer. I saw suicide as something to fall back on, a kind of safety net. Taking the pills was easy. Once I had got on a bus to the Gap but when I looked down, there were some fishermen down there on the rocks. I know it sounds silly but I thought what if I jump and they take my wallet and then no-one would ever know my name?

Paul is currently receiving benefits, is case managed, and regularly attends adult education classes. His illness is not considered serious enough to warrant a disability pension. He is good natured, articulate, receptive to ideas, and he makes thoughtful and perceptive contributions to the group sessions. His work continues to progress and contradicts, as it has from the outset, his poor self-image. He has no long-term plans. Paul says: 'I'm just going to see how it goes. After all, if it all goes wrong, I can try suicide again. It's a bit like a companion really.'

Conclusion

The purpose of reconstructing the oral history of this student has been to highlight the kinds of problems and choices that face clients of the LANT program. My approach has arisen out of concern about developments in adult education policy and the flexibility of the system to address such clients' needs. As the story shows, these needs can include some disturbing issues and that in the backgrounds of LANT students may lie trauma and displacement. 'Paul' reminds us of the mental and emotional vulnerability experienced by a person being made 'redundant'. By foregrounding the student's voice, albeit in a reconstructed fashion, I intend to draw attention to the question of how to ensure personalised interaction between adult educators and learners in the face of change that increasingly seems no longer to consider individual student needs as its priority.

3 The all-seeing eye: a stakeholder narrative of applying for the dole

Michael Chin

This paper documents and analyses Michael Chin's own experience as a casualised professional of seeking unemployment benefits on an intermittent basis. Using his experience to frame his argument, he reflects on recent changes to the welfare regime and examines the way in which Centrelink's processes establish and maintain an inequitable relationship of power with the customer. His analysis of Centrelink documentation and the coercive practices used in respect of welfare recipients demonstrates a deficit model of the customer that ignores the systemic causes of unemployment.

Introduction

My contribution to the Mutual Obligation Initiative debate is made on the basis of my extended experience as a marginalised, professional worker and as a long-term if intermittent recipient of welfare benefits, known as 'Newstart Allowance'. I belong to what I have no doubt is an increasingly large number of skilled, educated, and mature workers who depend for an income on work as casuals, consultants, and short-term contractors. Unlike some of my colleagues in this position, however, I have no private means of income support upon which I may draw to sustain myself during times 'between jobs'.

Having concluded yet another stint of professional employment on a short-term contract (lasting almost for a whole year this time), I find myself applying once more for the dole. The very thought fills me with dread: how long is it before I can get the next job? How much longer must I consent to be ensnared within the panoptic gaze of Centrelink?

This paper represents an endeavour to reflect on the significance of salient developments in the welfare regime in respect of unemployment since I was last within its ambit. It also attempts to make sense of my thoughts and feelings regarding my 'captivity' within this discursive regime. By 'discursive', I mean the combination of knowledge and power that shapes social interactions – for instance, between the state and those it purports to assist. The term 'regime', used throughout this paper, refers to all aspects of the policy and practices relating to citizens seeking unemployment benefits. These policies and practices deploy particular representations and relations of power that position welfare recipients in specific ways and encourage a personalised relationship with customers at the same time as establishing a pattern of surveillance and coercion.

Registration: the interview

There have been some changes made to the application process since I last applied for benefits. I was able to register by telephone and set up an appointment for the interview at the same time. There were, of course, other changes about which I knew, and of which I was seeking further detail, the dole diaries being foremost among these. The friendly Customer Service Operator informed me that I would now be obliged to keep such a diary but that the required number of prospective employer contacts (up to a maximum of 15 per fortnight) was a matter for 'negotiation' between the Customer Service Officer, who would interview me on the appointed day, and me. But before I elaborate upon that matter, I shall digress a moment in an effort to describe something of my feelings at that particular moment of initial contact with Centrelink.

Put simply, I felt immediately and inextricably captured by the agency's processes and perspective. My previous records were easily retrieved from the database, which represented a loss of control over my personal details as well as invoking a sense of ease of surveillance, and, within the next week or so, I was to front the local office where I could expect to sign consent to the loss of even more of my privacy and anonymity.

These emotions foreshadowed the first of many unpleasant experiences which began with the occasion of the interview. The Customer Service Officer who interviewed me was clearly distracted and seemed more interested in the idiosyncrasies of the office technology than in anything I recognised as customer service. I had already failed to comply with the requirements since I had not supplied all the necessary documents. I would have two weeks to do so or face the threat of a lapse of my interim registration. This meeting emphasised my concern about loss of control over the personal details of my life and my growing alarm about the power imbalance in my relationship with Centrelink as a welfare recipient.

In the meantime, there were forms to read, fill out, and sign. There was also a compulsory seminar to attend, at which I understood I would be further informed of my rights, duties, and obligations in relation to Newstart Allowance. The very prospect of attendance at this seminar, however, also filled me with a sense of dread. It conjured images of the formal inductions that I understand are conducted in jails and in the military, in which the new participant is located at the bottom of the hierarchy and limited in his or her capacity to engage in, or even influence, decision-making.

Towards the end of my interview, I was handed a booklet emblazoned with the unassuming title, *Jobseeker guide*. I took it without a second thought and resolved to read it later. Imagine my horror upon discovery of its hidden contents. The much vaunted 'dole diary' was in fact located within its pages and relevant spaces had already been filled with my name, jobseeker identification number, and the required number of contacts per fortnight. So much for negotiation. My concerns about equitable participation in decision-making that affected me seemed to be borne out.

Employability assessment

Completion of a full-scale questionnaire, 'Claim for Job Network assistance while looking for work', is also a requirement on application for Newstart Allowance. The questionnaire comprises 39 items, which are designed to ascertain the customer's work history, skill levels – including literacy – and overall employability. Much of this information becomes automatically available to Job Network member organisations upon customer registration with them.

The extent to which this information can be used to sift and sort customers by race, ethnicity, gender, level of educational attainment, and so on is disturbing. The spaces in the text reserved for 'Office use only' are peppered with imperatives to Centrelink workers to record critical items in an exacting and strictly uniform manner. These prompts appear to have been designed to maximise opportunities for sharing and cross-matching of data between the various layers of government, welfare bureaucracy, and the private sector.

Whatever the official rationale for this degree of hierarchical division of unemployed workers into their respective categories, it is no doubt convenient as a means by which the welfare regime may determine the appropriate type and level of surveillance, discipline, and control of the customer. I surmise that it is possibly also used by Job Network member organisations to determine the extent to which they may be prepared to assist potential customers, although the policy pronouncements featured in the *Employment services industry code of conduct* suggest that there are no such constraints on assistance. My experience in the welfare system suggests, however, that customers with the most likelihood of delivering a 'satisfactory' outcome are also the most likely to be targeted for assistance.

The questionnaire demands some highly personal information. Its intrusiveness in posing such questions is offset by their labelling as 'non-compulsory'. At the head of each of these non-compulsory questions, applicants are assured:

> *You do not have to answer question [ ]. If you do answer it, the information you give will help us to help you.* (Centrelink October 1999)

This assurance does not mitigate the feelings of exposure that the questions engender nor does it inspire a desire to confide given previous assurances about the possibility of negotiation that was quickly abrogated.

The 'Activity Test'

Centrelink's 'Activity Test' is central to the hegemonic practices of the welfare regime in that recipients of Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance must satisfy its exacting requirements in order to establish and maintain their eligibility to receive Centrelink payments. But there are different requirements which are within the discretionary powers of Centrelink to impose upon different categories of people. This categorisation began with the questionnaire. Maintenance of the diary is, of course, one of the requirements. It contains a

useful summary of the requirements overall, which, I suggest reveals the coercive aspects of the regime's disciplinary practices most clearly:

> *. . . Centrelink* ***has to know*** *that you are* ***actively*** *looking for work. It ensures that money goes to those who are* ***genuine jobseekers****. To demonstrate this you must satisfy the activity test and meet* ***other*** *obligations*
>
> *This means you should:*
> ***actively*** *look for suitable paid work . . .*
> *be willing to undertake* ***any*** *work you're* ***able*** *to do including part-time and casual;*
> *agree to requests from Centrelink to go on an approved training course;*
>
> *Other things you need to do:*
> *fill in this diary;*
> ***never*** *refuse a job offer unless you have a good reason, including part time and casual offers;*
> *always attend your job interviews;*
> *provide information requested by Centrelink and*
> *attend Centrelink appointments.*
>
> (Centrelink December 1999, emphases added)

The requirements for those in receipt of Youth Allowance are considerably more stringent and are written in a decidedly more authoritarian and paternalistic tone:

> *Under Youth Allowance, young people will satisfy the activity test if they are:*
> *studying in an approved course full time;*
> *participating in approved training full-time;*
> *undertaking a combination of approved activities which constitutes a full time load; or*
> *undertaking full-time jobsearch.* (Centrelink December 1999)

Dole diary as disciplinary practice

The *Jobseeker guide*, like all printed matter produced for, and sanctioned by, Centrelink appears remarkably benign. No hint here of any punitive practices to which a customer may be subject for breaches of the requirements. Indeed, with the partial exception of the dole diary itself, in which these disciplinary measures are suggested, there is no mention of them in the *Jobseeker guide*. Such information is not easily obtained from the range of literature that may be freely available to the public at Centrelink offices. It can be found, however, in the range of documents regularly distributed directly to those who are already in receipt of welfare payments (see, for example, the Centrelink publication (May 1999), *Future directions: a guide for jobseekers*). In other words, any indication of sanctions against customers is less visible in the publicity material of the

welfare regime – its public representation – than in that material that reinforces the relationship tying customers into its system.

The method of completion for the diary entries is relatively straightforward. The questions relate to prospective employer contact details, type of work sought, and whether the job sought is full-time, part-time, or casual. It hardly needs to be added, I think, that customers may feel encouraged to 'fake' entries, given the unnegotiated and potentially unrealistic number of contacts that may be required. Indeed, the regime anticipates this practice by repeating the warning that the diary entries will be checked from time to time by a Centrelink officer, who will contact prospective employers to verify that the customer has indeed approached them for work. This warning supports my argument that the relationship between the welfare regime and customers is imbalanced to facilitate the running of the system and its bureaucratic processes rather than to service inclusively the needs of its customers and to encourage uncoerced participation.

The diary format further supports this argument. An interesting feature is the space at the end of each individual entry for 'Your notes'. But what kind of notes would be acceptable within the kind of structure and culture of the welfare regime, which promotes and then abrogates the practice of negotiating the number of contacts required? To what extent can any notes be elaborated in a space that measures less than 1.5 x 7.5 cm? Barely enough, I suggest, to enable the inscription of one's name, let alone anything else of significance to the process. The implication of the regime's interest in 'our' notes mainly serves to promote its public representation as a caring system that benignly addresses the concerns of specific customers. As a mechanism for feedback, however, its positioning and allotment of space in the diary denotes a less inclusive approach to customers.

How Centrelink will use this diary

The coercive dimension of the diary affects the industrial conditions of Centrelink staff at the same time as contributing to a punitive culture associated with welfare. When the use of the diary was first proposed by the Federal Howard Liberal-Coalition Government, staff members of the former Department of Social Security, which administered unemployment benefits, vetoed its introduction on the grounds that it would be too difficult to enforce and would create an additional administrative burden for staff whose existing resources for administration were already overstretched.

A solution was introduced that seamlessly promotes enforcement in such a way as to reinforce the benign representation of the system *and* to shift the burden of surveillance away from staff to customer self-regulation. Under the current regime, Centrelink staff are only required to scrutinise the diary at random, which puts the onus of self-regulation on the customer. Failure on the part of the customer to comply with the diary requirements may result in sanctions, notably the loss of part or all of their welfare payments for specified

periods. Additionally, such measures may be imposed upon customers for failure to comply with any given requirement of the Activity Test. The prospect of these punitive consequences may suffice to coerce customers into compliance. For the welfare regime, there are now coercive mechanisms available at little additional cost to those charged with its administration.

Implicating the individual

Under the current system, dissemination of literature by Centrelink proliferates. A newsletter, entitled ironically, *Employment update*, is posted to customers on a regular basis and keeps readers informed of detailed changes in government and departmental policy and practice. There is also an increase in the promotional materials for various Job Network member organisations. A detailed analysis of their contents is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper. Their common feature is the extent to which they problematise the individual in terms of reinforcing ties between the welfare system and its customers at the same time as preventing individual input beyond receipt of benefits and compliance with procedures.

This positioning of the individual further diminishes the agency of customers while it promotes representation of the regime as benign and inclusive. Political and economic causes of unemployment at both the national and local levels are erased. This approach also shifts attention from shortcomings in the system's processes – for instance, to address individual needs and circumstances in respect of employment. The rationale for unemployment becomes a failure on the part of the individual to hit upon the right combination of education, training, and job-seeking skills. Alternatively, the failure lies in the customer's efforts: individual jobseekers are simply not trying hard enough. It is notable, for example, the extent to which the *Jobseeker guide* is devoted to the provision of 'useful' information on various methods of looking for a job, how to approach the writing of a résumé, and how to conduct oneself at an interview.

Customer service: a more 'personal' approach

This differential positioning of the customer is reflected in the language of the Activity Test and other Centrelink documents. The use of the personal pronouns, 'you', 'we', and 'us' purports to locate the customer within a highly personalised model of power relations. Of particular significance here is Centrelink's insistence on representing the customer as an individual (see, for example, *Employment update: issue 7* December 1999, 2), despite the fact that most of its practices place customers in certain fixed and generalised categories of cultural, occupational, and educational sameness. For all the personalised rhetoric, the structure of power relations remains hierarchised and disenfranchising for individuals.

This kind of a personalised yet impersonal relationship with the regime is set to become entrenched over the coming months, since customers will become

increasingly subject to surveillance by a single Customer Service Officer to whom they will be allocated for the duration of their time on welfare benefits. In this, as with other practices targeted at the seduction, edification, and discipline of customers, the official representations of the regime insist that the rationale, aims, and objectives of policy development have been designed to serve the interests of the customer:

> *We have introduced one-to-one contact in response to your feedback*
>
> *Centrelink is always looking at ways to improve its services for jobseekers*
>
> *Your Centrelink one-to-one contact will now be taking you through 4 steps:*
>
> 1. *Assessment – Finding out how we can help you*
> 2. *Work plan – Agreeing to activities you will do to find work*
> 3. *Referral – Referring you to programs which could help improve your chances of finding work*
> 4. *Follow Up – Your one-to-one contact will regularly review your progress with you.* (Employment update: issue 7 December 1999)

In other words, discipline by the welfare regime now includes even more penetrating mechanisms of surveillance used 'for our own good'. With its superficially but seductively personalised language, as well as the coercive practices that tie welfare recipients into the regime, the state is characterised as 'caring but stern', while it is the individual who has the 'problem' of unemployment, who embodies lack. The political context of unemployment and other social welfare issues remains invisible.

Job Network member organisations

Under previous Centrelink regimes, it was mandatory for jobseekers to be registered with the now defunct Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) as well as the Department of Social Services (DSS). The culture of the former CES could be characterised as that of 'benign neglect', a characterisation used by the Federal Government to rationalise change.

The demise of the CES and the DSS have been critical developments in the establishment of the current welfare regime, which insists upon more 'active' management of the unemployed. Today, it is mandatory for customers to register with at least one Job Network member. Many of these are part of the private sector, owned by business, church, or community organisations.

Under the current welfare regime, there is a range of potentially lucrative incentives for private and community-based interests to participate in the management of the 'unemployment problem'. Job Network member organisations are now charged with the provision of an increasing array of services to the unemployed that were once considered the direct responsibility of government to provide. In order to obtain these rewards, however, the member organisation must demonstrate its compliance with the disciplinary practices of the welfare regime, notably in the implementation of mandatory reporting

procedures (see, for example, *Employment services industry code of conduct*).

The development of the Job Network is frequently represented in the literature produced by Centrelink and Job Network member organisations as a change that gives customers more choice. Unfortunately, despite the apparently large number of providers, choice for customers remains limited given the constraints imposed by the culture of sameness within which these organisations are apparently required to operate. For example, I have located none which specialises in the placement of highly skilled professionals, except for those jobseekers who have the qualifications and skills that are valued by the corporate sector. The nature of the 'choice' referred to in the promotional literature is therefore narrowly quantitative rather than qualitative.

What is disturbing here is the extent to which the private sector is apparently encouraged to act complicitly with the state's coercive welfare agenda by the structure of the current system. For instance, in an effort to deliver an outcome and obtain the 'bounty' incentive, the Job Network member organisation may be tempted to lock me into demeaning and low-paid work for which I have no interest, but which, from the perspective of the welfare regime, I am able to do. It may also be possible for the member organisation to require my participation in a type of training, which it is perfectly clear I do not need, but which, by virtue of my participation, voluntary or otherwise, delivers an 'outcome' within the narrow parameters of the current welfare regime. I may conceivably be required to register with a church-based member organisation that openly supports intolerance of lesbians and gay men and which may discriminate unfairly against me on those grounds. Should I fail to nominate a Job Network member organisation, I will be assigned one. Of great personal and political concern is the fact that I might one day fall under the jurisdiction of an organisation with whose principles I fundamentally disagree and against the practices of which I may feel a moral imperative to resist.

The extension to the private sector of these disciplinary powers over welfare recipients maximises opportunities for the state to extend the regime of surveillance over the welfare-dependent. Ironically, one of the means by which this is enabled is by obviating the need for regular attendance at Centrelink offices.

Conclusion: does this work for me?

The Activity Test, the dole diary, the customer service approach, and Job Network member organisation features of the welfare regime that I have addressed appear to be aimed, I suggest, at compliance with a range of coercive and disciplinary practices, which maintain a high and increasingly complex level of surveillance and control over the lives of the welfare dependant. There are claims – stated as well as strongly implied – to efficacy in the official discourse of the Centrelink-Job Network enterprise. As I have attempted to show in this brief analysis, however, the narratives employed by this discursive regime are almost invariably fixed upon a deficit model of the individual. From this

perspective, it is the unemployed who have the 'problem' of unemployment. The systemic causes of unemployment, such as workplace restructuring, which has led to increasing casualisation of the workforce for example, are overlooked.

In the face of these disciplinary practices, I feel a considerable sense of loss of my privacy, freedom of movement and speech, and other rights and privileges that I have been motivated under the rubric of bourgeois liberal democracy to expect. I also know from experience that when I am working and not (for the time being) subject to the gaze of the welfare regime, these rights and privileges are indeed more freely available to me. In addition, my personal repugnance for, and the political indignation I may feel at, the worst excesses of the welfare regime are immaterial, given the extent to which I must constantly demonstrate compliance with it, in order to maintain my eligibility to receive welfare payments. In lieu of these social welfare developments and their far-reaching penetration of the private sector, resistance to this form of captivity seems increasingly difficult, not to mention futile.

Finally, given the radical restructuring that is an obvious feature of the contemporary world of work, including the work for which I am highly trained, qualified and experienced, I am feeling decidedly pessimistic about my future career prospects. Given these circumstances, I ask myself, will it ever be possible to break this cycle of inadequate and punitive welfare and short-term, ultimately exploitative work dependence?

4 Mutual Obligation: how to survive and enjoy the experience

Sue Frischke

This paper examines the Mutual Obligation Initiative in the specific context of literacy and numeracy provision for Youth Allowance recipients at Spencer Institute of TAFE in Whyalla. It discusses the changes to conditions to broaden the eligibility of those accessing the LANT program in the face of limited initial attendance. It then addresses the suitability of the program in the light of the socioeconomic problems that face its students. Finally, it discusses the need for flexibility and negotiated learning in the program and for the integration of LANT with social and personal skills and vocational education programs in order to address students' needs.

Introduction

This paper looks at the Mutual Obligation Initiative in the context of the broader education approach of the UNESCO framework, and in the specific context of TAFE teaching in Whyalla, an economically depressed region in South Australia. In particular, the paper examines changes to the LANT program and focuses on Youth Allowance recipients. The first section explains the background to my LANT teaching – the policy change that has seen the introduction of the initiative and the effects of changed conditions on program attendance. I then consider specific aspects of the regional background of our LANT provision, such as demography, student history, the suitability of the program, and the need for flexibility to meet student needs. Finally, the paper considers directions for LANT provision including the integration of literacy/numeracy training with vocational skills training as well as personal and social skills training.

My teaching in the context of the Mutual Obligation Initiative

The Delors (1996) report to UNESCO, *Learning: the treasure within*, provides a broad context for my personal teaching practice that I have tried to relate to the needs of the students in the program in which I teach. According to Delors (1996, 37), education throughout life is based on four pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. This approach covers the educational spectrum from higher order to basic learning needs.

These basic needs, I believe, comprise *both* essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem solving) – all areas which are covered in learning outcomes in Adult Basic Education curriculum – *and* the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes) required by human beings to survive and to develop to their full potential, to live and

work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning.

The UNESCO framework encourages the development of an holistic approach to education and training, where socioeconomic and personal issues associated with learning are taken into account. The framework recognises that a LANT client may have needs that can be developed in conjunction with literacy and numeracy, which is partly why it is a useful context for teaching practice.

In reflecting on my teaching program, Literacy and Numeracy Training (LANT), provided in my TAFE institute and funded through DETYA's Mutual Obligation Initiative for jobseekers, I have had to question where literacy and numeracy training sits within the UNESCO education framework. It offers some of the basic learning tools in literacy, numeracy, oral expression, and problem solving, but can these be developed in isolation from the development of positive attitudes and values?

When the Federal Liberal-Coalition Government contracted to fund training for unemployed youth aged 18-24 under the Mutual Obligation Initiative in September 1998, provision of literacy and numeracy training for the unemployed was driving this initiative, along with a concern at the high statistics for youth unemployment. Under the Mutual Obligation Initiative, participants have a choice of activities and few clients initially volunteered for LANT programs. With few takers early in 1999 and again mid-year, the parameters of the LANT program were broadened. For many jobseekers, this training became compulsory if they met the assessment criteria. The age limit was also changed to include Newstart clients under 35 as well as persons on Youth Allowance under 18. It is this latter group that is the focus of my research.

The decisions at the national level raise questions about the equation of LANT training with the needs of participants whose jobseeker profile deems them eligible for literacy and numeracy training and whether such policy decisions take into account all the factors that impact on the lives of the participants. My work experience tells me that these factors include the socioeconomic environment, family/or home life, homelessness, previous negative educational experiences, peer group issues, crime, drug use, and attitudes to compulsory education and training.

The changes to the conditions of Youth Allowance eligibility have had a large impact on the Spencer Institute's literacy and numeracy program from the start of 1999. Persons who had not completed Year 12 and were not sufficiently employed have had to return to school or participate in training. Some students who were unsuccessful in gaining acceptance in vocational training programs have been referred to my program; other referrals had rejected school or were referred by the schools. Still others had been referred from Centrelink while a few had been referred from private employment agencies. It was mandatory for Youth Allowance recipients to be involved in 20 hours of approved training or similar activities. For one reason or another, all my LANT students were deemed 'youth at risk' and were also eligible to be involved with the Job Placement

Education and Training (JPET) program. The following program was constructed by my working in collaboration with Centrelink personnel, JPET and the other LANT providers at Spencer TAFE: students had 12-15 hours literacy/numeracy and communication training approved by Centrelink; the remainder of their expected training hours involved activities approved by JPET.

As I reflect on this program and evaluate its success, there are many variables to be considered:

- demography of the region
- student history
- suitability of the program.

Without increasing their skills level, many of this group would find it difficult to succeed in higher level training or employment that involved reading written language or numeracy. Most learners have been assessed at National Reporting System (NRS) 1. There has been a correlation between reading skills, age, and less abstract abilities. These students face an extremely competitive workforce: a lack of skills corresponds to poor future employment prospects.

Demography of the region

The region contains a rural industrial city that has felt the effects of globalisation severely, in the forms of restructuring and downsizing of the workforce within industry and the reduction or disappearance of regional government offices and other service industries. This negative spiral has affected local small businesses with resultant reduced possibilities of employment. On the other hand, there has been an increase in part-time employment in the retail industry, which services the city and its hinterland; several national chain stores have opened in the past few years.

The population of the region is approximately 10 750. The unemployment rate has been very slowly increasing – from 13.5% in June 1998 to 14% as of June 1999. The age structure projections for 1997 are shown in Table 4.1. The unemployed rate by age in 1996 is shown in Table 4.2. These statistics show that, while there is not a large disparity between total age structure groupings, young people between the ages of 15-24 (ie unemployed recipients of Youth Allowance) run an extremely high risk of being unemployed.

Age	% Total
10-14	7.5%
15-19	6.7%
20-24	6.5%
25-29	8.9%
Total Population	28.6%

Table 4.1

Age	% Total
15-19	30.4%
20-24	20.1%
25-44	12.0%
45 plus	10.5%
Total	13.9%

Table 4.2

The unemployment rate of 14% in 1999 has not substantially changed from these 1996, 1997 statistics so it is extremely unlikely that literacy and numeracy training will assist the 15-24 age group in gaining employment. Such training is more likely to increase this group's chances of gaining acceptance into a skilled vocational training program. It should be noted, however, that this potential is not a 'successful outcome' according to the criteria underlying the LANT contract, which stipulate that a student's skills must have risen by one NRS level or the student must have gained a traineeship.

Student history

The majority of the students have been persuaded to attend training either by the threat of losing their Youth Allowance, by parents who have been financially affected by the loss of the allowance and its contribution to the household budget, or by parents or caregivers concerned about their child's future chances of employment.

Nearly half of the students under 18 started the program at the beginning of the year and the rest have been referred during the year. Most have left school without completing Years 9 or 10; some have been suspended at 14 and others have left once they have reached 15. These students have a common school background of poor attendance and/or disruptive behaviour. To them, the school curriculum is either irrelevant to their personal pursuits or too difficult. Most voice negative attitudes towards teachers, school, and education in general and admit that they were not able to conform to school regulations and discipline.

Of the students who dropped out of our program, some did so very early after commencing training while others were withdrawn because poor attendance meant that they had breached their Mutual Obligation Initiative contracts.

Suitability of the LANT program

It very soon became obvious that our LANT program needed to change to accommodate the different profiles of our students. The program had to become more relevant to the learning needs and styles of this age group. We had a number of obstacles to surmount.

Inflexibility of the timetable

Our program and staff are involved in delivering a number of sub-program areas, such as, for example, Certificate I in Preparatory Education (CPE), Introduction to Vocational Education (IVEC), Women's Education, English as a Second Language (ESL), and a School-TAFE Pathways Program. We also liaise and share our program area and allocated rooms with Aboriginal Education. The result has been a fairly inflexible timetable comprising three-hour sessions.

Mutual Obligation Initiative and community clients attend the same sessions. The classes are organised according to the curriculum studied. This arrangement has worked well previously: originally, Special Intervention Program (SIP) clients were integrated with community clients and the integration has continued with adult Mutual Obligation Initiative students and the motivated or non-disruptive youth. But with an influx of special needs youth in the 16-year-old age bracket, CPE and IVEC language and maths classes have had to be arranged more according to group dynamics than curriculum.

A particular problem specific to our area with the youth who attend the program is that most know of each other already and have developed friendships or antagonisms with each other through prior school or social experiences. As a result, peer groups and alliances have already been established, which has caused difficulties because students have only a choice of two classes.

Socioeconomic problems of youth under 18

Many of the youth who are under 18 and have formed the focus of my research come from backgrounds characterised by multi-generational unemployment and dysfunctional or single-parent families. Some of the group live independently. Many are regularly in court and/or serving community service for break-ins, stealing, disorderly behaviour, and assault. On two occasions, students have been taken into custody by the police while they attend training because their whereabouts are known. Understandably, this intervention does not encourage attendance.

When these students do attend classes, their behaviour is often disruptive. Their concentration span is very short and they are easily distracted. They have very little motivation and tend to be egocentric, noisy, and demanding of instant help and attention. They are extremely impatient if they cannot achieve instant success. We have noted as the months progressed, however, a small but significant improvement in their levels of tolerance to newcomers who want to join the class.

Crisis time with this group came in mid-May. We had considered these students to have special needs and of being at risk of leaving the program due to non-attendance or behaviour issues. Complaints concerning their behaviour and attitudes had been coming from adult students – two left the program – other youth, ground staff, cleaners, and, finally, a relief lecturer. We had been

recording incidents and regularly counselled students. It was time to reflect on what were we doing.

We had been teaching the students language and maths in a classroom-based learning setting according to the conditions of the contract. We needed to ask the following questions:

- why had they been behaving in this manner?
- were their social problems ours?
- what stance or direction should be taken to reduce the occurrence of this behaviour and prevent confrontation?
- what did we perceive as the students' specific needs?
- what did *they* perceive as *their* needs?
- did our perception of their needs gel with other agencies' perception of their needs?
- what had been their learning history?
- how would they learn best?
- how were we going to meet their needs and the needs of the others in the class?
- why were they here instead of at school?
- what were the reasons for their attendance or non-attendance?

These students have been compelled to return to education and training but, as Peter Dwyer (1996) reports, factors other than education and training may be more important to those students under 18 who are leaving school. These factors include coping with personal issues, such as health, sexuality, relationships, including those in the workplace as well as with other adults and young people in the community and family life, and the participation in formal and informal networks, activities, leisure pursuits, and risk-taking behaviours. To re-engage early school leavers in further training that may lead to work is important, but a person has to be ready to learn. Learning needs to be meaningful, realistic, and relevant. With this in mind, we thought we could begin building two of Delors' pillars – 'learning to know' and 'learning to do'.

Changes to the program

Through discussions with the youth group, we have worked out a program in which literacy and numeracy can be integrated into their workshops. Their choice of workshop initially was carpentry, for which we had a lecturer but no work setting: the carpentry workshop had been closed down and the tools had mysteriously disappeared.

This setback was yet another disappointment for this particular group, which suffers the effects of rationalisation and the current economic climate of the region. The local building industry cannot generate sufficient demand for training young carpenters, although it is the desired career pathway of half of these young students.

The perfect scenario would have been the now defunct Workskills program, which had operated in the region and in which unemployed skilled

labourers shared their expertise. Most have indicated that this type of program is where they have been happiest learning. It had purpose, because often it was their chosen vocational pathway, and the language and numeracy had relevance. Also, they were picking up skills which could be applied to future training or general living.

We have managed, however, to arrange a substitute program – some car maintenance and welding. The modules used from the Certificate I in Preparatory Education (CPE) include:

- measurement
- everyday calculations
- introduction to technical reading.

First, the students have to have occupational health and safety training, so we have modified the existing course. The majority of the class have passed within the required time of one week. The remaining few have passed after extra one-to-one tuition.

The next problem has been obtaining proper equipment – specifically, expensive steel-capped workboots. A local industry and supplier responded to our appeals by supplying sufficient boots. This response points to the need for community support if such programs are to succeed, particularly in rural regions.

Outcome of the program

The program has had limited success, due mainly to the ad hoc way that we have had to structure it and to the students themselves. The irregularity of individual attendance has prevented any sequenced learning. Unless the task interests them, students' attention rapidly wanes in the workshop. The behaviour of some has posed a danger to others and may have spoiled the chances of similar groups' being allowed into the workshops. After a while, it became obvious that groups need to be small – no more than five or six – and a greater choice of workshop activities is necessary. In addition, students need to make their own rules and regulations for their behaviour in the workshop and to determine a list of consequences for non-adherence.

We have made a bargain with the students. To gain access to the workshop, the students first have to attend a morning session that involves recognising learning styles, problem solving, and communication. A range of modules has been selected for the program:

From the Certificate I in Personal Management, we include:

- Personal Skills Audit/Learning Goals
- Social Skills
- Problem-solving Techniques.

From the Certificate 1 in Preparatory Education, we include:

- Different Ways of Learning
- Interpersonal Communication
- Working and Studying in a Group.

It is not anticipated that the learning outcomes of all modules would be achieved or even that all modules would be used. Methodologies include 4MAT-style instructions from the commonly used program. A variety of resources are used to aid students in a program of self-discovery. Edward De Bono's, *Thinking skills and games*, Mensa mind games, and problem-solving in maths from *Breaking the maths barrier* are some of the resources that we have used for problem-solving and group work.

Styles of learning are also explored. The most popular, and a successful starting point, has been *The brain*, a computer program that prints the hemisphere of the brain and pinpoints the L/R 'hot spot'. It provides a written interpretation like a horoscope – and is probably about as accurate. Another success has been studying the 'Mr Bean' character on video for body language.

Late arrivals and irregular attendance by different members of the group make it impossible to have structured, sequenced morning sessions. To encourage socialisation, rules have been broken and tea/coffee and biscuits are available in the class during the sessions. (This may, for some, be the first meal of the day.) If anyone does not attend these morning sessions, however, the others ensure that the morning absentees are not permitted into the workshop later.

Most of the young males in this specific group believe that the program has been of benefit to them. Those who do not hold this view have rarely attended the course and have subsequently withdrawn. Most have indicated to me that they feel that they have achieved and learnt a lot more in the last nine months than they did in their last year at school. Certainly, I can attest that their behaviour is much better. They spend a lot of time as a group or as individuals just talking with me – in the class, at breaks, or in the office. While the purpose is often to con a coffee or cigarette from me, it has become a time to relate and to trust and, as much as they will allow, to drop a few personal barriers. There are still seven, male, 'at risk' students, who commenced at the beginning of the year; another four, who enrolled during the year, are still attending.

There are also female students – initially, two who were part of the original group and had been placed in the group because they are familiar with the boys, can tolerate and ignore them, and can stand up for themselves, and, subsequently, another five, who joined the group in the second semester. The girls have had the option to participate in workshop activities but have only been interested in carpentry which is not available. They have opted to do basic computing or join a class studying women's issues.

The original boys have resented this influx of female students. They group themselves into separate areas of the room and either ignore the female students or have slanging matches with them.

It has been extremely difficult during the interview process to assess a student's true attitude to study and potential behaviour. Most withdrawals that have breached the Mutual Obligation Initiative contract have been males under 20. Some have cited their inability to participate in class-based learning; others

have found beginning at 9.00 am too gruelling. If workshop classes began at 1.00 pm, however, they still rarely attended and, gradually, have stopped attending altogether. One withdrew after a suicide in the family. Many of these students will still be under 19 for much of the next year and will still have to participate in training either under the contractual requirements required by the Mutual Obligation Initiative or as self-funded students.

During the year, we have regularly received inquiries from 15-17-year-olds who have been suspended from school due to lack of attendance or who wish to leave school. Most refuse to return to school because it either does not meet their needs or they cannot survive the school environment.

A problem peculiar to our area is that we have two junior high schools and one senior secondary school. Students can leave the junior high school at 15. Most, however, cannot access Youth Allowance until they turn 16. They are then compelled to return to training to receive the benefits. This situation creates two problems. First, the level of skill of a 16-year-old who has to return to educational training is often too low for entry to the senior secondary school; at the same time, this 16-year-old is too old to return to the junior high school. The schools are currently developing programs to try and rectify this problem. Second, the habits, attitudes, and behaviour that students develop in the 12-month interval between school and further training are often anti-social and not conducive to subsequent successful outcomes. We do not anticipate a lessening of the flow of these adolescents in the near future.

Conclusion

These young people need more than literacy and numeracy training to make them ready for work. They also need to learn practical vocational skills, an area where their motivation to achieve is high, and to gain an understanding of workplace ethics. In conjunction with this training, they desperately need to develop their personal and social skills and values-the last two of Delors' pillars, 'learning to be' and 'learning to live together'.

For these 'youth at risk' or, indeed, for any Mutual Obligation Initiative student with extra needs beyond literacy and numeracy, the parameters of their educational training and experience must be holistic to enable the development of all aspects of their lives. As Delors (1996, 22) states:

> *None of the talents which are hidden like buried treasure in every person must be left untapped ... education should, therefore, constantly adapt to changes in society, it must not fail to pass on the attainments, foundations and benefits of human experience.*

What is the destiny of this particular youth group? Is it a life of crime and its consequences? Is it a life of long-term unemployment? As John Freeland (1999) suggests, how can the failure of an education system be solved in 400 hours let alone the layers that make up the fabric of a young person's life be addressed?

We need to be able to tender and structure a youth program collaboratively. Currently, all professional parties, LANT providers, JPET

programs, work-seeking programs, and other social welfare programs are tendering for funding separately. Often the cheapest, not the best, programs win the funding. Governments should recognise that education professionals who work within a community, particularly with youth at risk, relate best to their specific needs. Liaison is occurring between some parties on a needs basis. This liaison has been instigated by teachers in the different programs in which young students are involved. It often in our own personal time. We are fortunate to have excellent support with our Centrelink personnel, who are our mutual contact point. It would also help if those involved in court community programs are included in developing this holistic approach.

My experience with these young people has made me realise how much they need to value themselves. They cannot be forced or financially blackmailed to attend training; but they are open to persuasion. In order to value themselves, others need to value them. For example, their time needs to be valued. Time spent in the program could be used to compensate, if only partially, for their court debts.

A program that is more suited to their needs may result in these young people's placement of more value on their learning and the recognition of their great need for literacy and numeracy training to assist them in achieving a better quality of life. But they are young. Their goals are immediate. They live in the present; they are spontaneous; they ignore the consequences of their actions. Individually, however, each of these young students has huge untapped potential, which can be realised more readily with integrated, relevant, and flexible learning that builds on community support and addresses the personal and social needs of the students as well as literacy/numeracy and vocational skills training.

5 Stakeholders' experiences of Mutual Obligation

Pauline O'Maley

In this chapter, Pauline O'Maley analyses and critiques stakeholder experiences using data gathered by Gail Wallace, Sheilagh Kelly, and Patrick Gurr. She draws on broader social and political theories to interpret the imperatives of the LANT program. This paper challenges the current policy perspective that focuses on individual responsibility and highlights some of the constraints on the program that emerge from the case study research. It concludes that, despite reported successful classroom experiences, aspects of the LANT program require serious review in the light of its intended outcomes.

Introduction

In order to understand why, at this point in time, provision of adult literacy services in Australia is framed within the government's Mutual Obligation Initiative, it is necessary to examine the broader political, economic, and social context within which this activity sits.

> *[W]e can no longer, if we ever could, afford the luxury of debates about language, curriculum and pedagogy that are located only in educational contexts: the wider context of world economic and organisational development impinges at every point, not simply in an economic deterministic sense but in the broader sense of providing the discursive orders to which such debates both respond and ... offer some challenge.*
>
> (Street 1998, 5)

One aim of this research project has been to examine the ways in which changing government policy has impacted on stakeholders' experiences in LANT programs. In particular, Centrelink staff, educational providers, and clients have been asked a series of open-ended questions to prompt rich description of their experiences of the program. Two strong themes have emerged from the data. The first relates to the culture and practice of the classroom and to classroom success. The second, interrelated theme emerges from the structural and systemic constraints that have impacted on and helped to shape classroom practice in LANT programs.

This paper looks at the changing environment of literacy and numeracy provision and the shift towards economic rationalist principles underpinning that provision. It examines the view of adult literacy provision as a passport to employment and the problems of assuming a homogenous population. After a description of the research process, the paper looks at the culture of LANT classrooms and teaching practice. I argue that, while there are some positive results when learning responds to clients' needs, there are a range of factors that

influence outcomes, which I discuss in some detail using data from the research. I then consider structural and systemic constraints on LANT provision, such as the compulsory nature of training, changes to teaching roles, and problems of distance and youth provision.

Education in a changing sociopolitical environment

The last two generations have seen enormous impacts and shifts within society, which have had a profound effect on our society from the macro governmental level to the micro context of work and educational environments. It is not easy, or indeed desirable, to compartmentalise these societal changes into categories. There is a complex interrelationship between the political, social, cultural and moral impacts of these 'new times' (Hall 1996). Some of these shifts and changes include the impact of globalisation, the collapse of communism and end of the cold war, changes to the balance of power, population and demographic changes, and the shifting of social boundaries (Popkewitz 1991). Another significant change is the shift towards a knowledge society (Drucker 1993).

Whereas in a capitalist society, production has been the currency, in the post-capitalist society, knowledge is commodified. Drucker (1993, 183) posits that we are shifting towards a knowledge society, in which the main products of trade will be information and knowledge. For Drucker, knowledge is increasingly not just *a* resource but rather *the* resource. Further, he suggests that we can no longer talk of knowledge in the singular but must acknowledge pluralistic knowledges. This conceptualisation of a knowledge society is significant to educational provision and the way it educates potential knowledge workers.

It is impossible to separate education from this larger debate. Economics has come increasingly to dominate as social democratic perspectives have been backgrounded. Fitzclarence and Kenway (1993) articulate this shift by representing economics as the master discourse. As economic rationalist principles have come to dominate the Australian political landscape, the social is subsumed by the economic: all problems are seen in economic terms. In the discourse of economic rationalism, issues such as privatisation, commercialism, diversification, deregulation and marketisation of public resources are imperatives. Notions of efficiency and effectiveness are foregrounded and once prominent discourses of social justice and equity have been silenced. Pusey (1991, 204) suggests '[t]he tail that is the market furiously wags the dog which is society.'

The effect of economic rationalist principles on education in Australia has been profound. Marginson (1992, 7) points out that 'the combination of economic rationalism and education brings two different worlds into collision'. In the economic rationalist discourse, education becomes a commodity and individuals become human capital (Lingard 1991, 1993; Knight, Lingard, and Porter 1993; Luke 1992; Marginson 1992, 1997). Market principles are unquestioningly accepted into education frameworks because a 'common sense' perspective views education as one of the keys to economic prosperity. In the

economisation of education, however, education is positioned consequently as a cost never as a benefit (Marginson 1997).

To understand the current government's discourse of education it is illuminating to look at the language of the then Federal Liberal-Coalition Government's Minister for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Dr David Kemp:

> *The Commonwealth regards the establishment of an open, competitive and responsive training market to be a critical instrument for enhancing Australia's competitiveness in the global economy. Vocational education and training in schools must be linked to the mainstream training system. This means that businesses and enterprises will need to be involved in the development of vocational education and training with their local schools. Equally there is a need for business organisations to become involved at the school system level in program design and planning processes.*
>
> (Speech given at Australian Council for Private Education and Training 1996.)

> *[T]here is a recognition that the future well being and employment prospects of Australians depend on Australia being able to compete in the global market place and respond flexibly to the shifts in demand within this marketplace. This national goal places a premium on ensuring that Australians have the best possible education and training to provide our institutions with that capacity for flexible adjustment. ... it is also important to appreciate that the obligation of schools and school systems is not only to provide an 'opportunity' to a student but extends to accountability for whether an 'opportunity' is realised..*
>
> (Address to the Annual Conference of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities 1996)

There is a renewed vigour and consistency in the language of economic imperatives here as he speaks of competitiveness in the global economy, the global market place, and of accountability. It is also clear that education is conceived in vocational terms.

In this climate of vocationalism, there is a constriction in the way in which education can be conceived. The notion of a broadly based general education has been subsumed by the narrowly conceived vocationally oriented competencies. Paradoxically, this narrowing of the conception of education comes at a time when unemployment is still hovering at or around 8% (Australian Bureau Statistics, Feb 2000) and youth unemployment is consistently much higher. This vocationally oriented education will be preparing many students for jobs that will at best be elusive and, at worst, non-existent, part-time, or irregular. It is in just such a climate that the benefits of a general education would be most apt. Knight, Lingard, and Porter (1993) dub this shift a change from schooling to skilling.

Funding for education has been steadily dwindling as focus has moved from resources to outcomes (Knight, Lingard, and Porter 1993) and educational

organisations are required to become leaner and meaner. Comber, Green, Lingard, and Luke (1998, 26), among many others, suggest that educational institutions have 'acted as "shock absorbers" for wider social and economic changes and problems.'

Critiques to this approach to education centre around the uncritical adaptation of market principles and the way in which business has manipulated educational agendas (Lingard 1991, 1993; Bates 1992; Banks 1993; Marginson 1992, 1997; O'Connor 1994; Seddon 1994; Knight, Lingard, and Porter 1993; Fitzclarence and Kenway 1993). Seddon (1994, 75) points to the contradictory nature of the discourse and the way in which this narrow approach advantages the already advantaged:

> *Vocationalism is committed to labourism. It takes the image of the trained male worker as its frame of reference. Such framing becomes exclusive because it only dimly discerns those beyond the frame: women, other social and cultural groups, the aged, children, and all those who are beyond, or marginalised within, the organised labour movement.*

Fitzclarence and Kenway (1993) argue that the marginalisation of teachers, the impoverishment of alternative educational discourses, including social democratic commitments, equality of opportunities and social justice foreshadow long-term social harm.

In this climate, the education 'market' is controlled by the emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness, on performance and 'measurable' and 'observable' outcomes. The climate is one in which accountability, efficiency, and performativity are the new social imperatives (Comber, Green, Lingard, and Luke 1998).

Adult literacy provision in this context can be read in a number of ways. The dominant discourse is literacy as a passport to employment or, to express the idea from the negative perspective in which it is often presented, literacy as a means of avoiding the unemployment and social welfare problems that are seemingly brought on by a literacy lack. The adult literacy student is often presented as an object that needs to be changed or adapted: '[I]n such circumstances, the focus of attention shifts from co-participating in practice to acting upon the person-to-be-changed' (Lave and Wenger 1991, 112). There are distinct aspects of this 'person-to-be-changed' discourse in the discourse of Mutual Obligation.

One of the major problems with literacy interventions is that providers assume that their understanding of literacy's utility will correspond to that of an imagined, uniform and homogenous 'target population' with similar circumstances, needs and aspirations (China and Robbins 1996, 158). Morphet (1996, 259) points to the political nature of this approach:

> *Despite the recurring dream of the grand campaign there is in fact no way in which the many can be carried together over the 'literacy line'. The problem is not technical ineffectiveness but political structure, 'illiteracy' is a constructed category of power and control.*

No matter what the reading of the adult literacy provision, it is essential that the positions open to the students are always of paramount concern. Lankshear (1997, 20) argues that in complex pluralistic societies, different social groups participate in what can be termed 'the cultural mainstream' from positions of relative advantage or disadvantage. Literacy students need to be afforded more diverse positions than the position of disadvantage with which they came to class. The key to this opportunity, I suggest, is a close examination of practice. 'Individuals are not autonomous, they too are formed within the ideologies and practices of society' (Morgan 1997, 6).

The research project

Case study approach

I used a case study approach for this research project, which seeks to describe and analyse the LANT program, in order to assess its effectiveness from the point of view of the major stakeholders. The qualitative approach caters for a study of people, their actions and motivations, beliefs and values. The study is contextualised by the micro context of the relationships between participants and the immediate setting of the LANT program as well as a macro context of the broad historical, social, political, and economic forces that impinge on the program.

The aim is to develop a greater knowledge of values, attitudes, beliefs and understandings of the stakeholders in LANT programs, to capture some of the complexities of 'real life' practice. This aim accords with a qualitative perspective of the world as 'socially constructed, complex and everchanging' (Glesne and Peshkin 1992, 6).

Sites and Participants

Five sites were initially chosen for this study but data was subsequently collected at only four of these sites. It is significant to note that the teacher/interviewer at the fifth site withdrew from the project because she felt that her tenure as a casual teacher was in jeopardy if she continued with the project, after her superior officer expressed a negative response to the project.

Three of the sites are in regional New South Wales. One of these sites subcontracts the LANT program to the other two. All three are small providers of further education in community settings. The fourth site is a large public provider in Sydney. This college won a LANT tender to provide distance courses to two regions, one in New South Wales and one in southern Queensland. The region on which this research concentrates is the southern Queensland region. All four sites in the study are geographically close and have similar socioeconomic features, such as a higher than average level of youth unemployment and incidence of part time work (ABS Census 1996).

The syllabus used as a vehicle for delivery of the LANT program in the three sites in regional New South Wales is the Victorian Certificate of General

Education for Adults (CGEA). The urban provider is using an adaptation of the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE), a certificate for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners.

Participants were chosen on the basis that they were stakeholders involved with the site at the time data was collected in late 1999. In all, 26 participants were interviewed, including 13 students, nine teachers, and four Centrelink staff.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most useful way of eliciting information and a suitable vehicle for asking questions about feelings and attitudes (Singleton, Straits, and Straits 1993). These semi-structured interviews allow participants freedom to develop ideas and themes and the interviewer to capture the experiences and 'lived meanings' (Kvale 1996). The focus of the interviews was to gain the perspective of the stakeholders-to hear their voices. Questions were open ended to allow for flexibility, to encourage cooperation, and to help establish rapport (Cohen and Manion 1980).

Two interviewers were used in this data-gathering stage. Both were chosen for their expressed interest in this research at preliminary meetings, their connections to the site, and their existing relationship with some of the participants.

Data from interviews was transcribed verbatim and the material was then coded and organised thematically. Carspecken (1996, 153) stresses the importance of 'good coding [that] will almost deliver your final analysis'. Provisional categories evolved from the coding (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Member checks were then carried out before analysis was completed.

Classroom practice and classroom successes

Both students and teachers have some very positive things to say about their LANT classroom experiences. For some, there is very much a sense of gains that have been struggled for and achieved, against some challenging odds. There are quite clear aspects of classroom practice about which students have spoken positively. What follow are some of the students' comments listed with these positive aspects:

- flexibility – 'You're still not stuck on the same thing everyday in here. You're sort of on something different every hour or hour and a half, like not based on the one thing everytime'
- individualised learning plans – 'I've basically improved a lot and I've learnt a lot, so yeah ... you get individual learning'
- student-focused learning – 'It's more at your pace, not sort of locked in ... what sort of needs you have'
- being treated like an adult – 'Here you are treated like an adult and you have your own responsibilities, you are not getting forced to do what you don't want to'

- positive classroom culture – from one, 'More and more you come here, and more and more you like it and enjoy it, you know. That's what I seem to find about it', and from another, 'The classes are friendly. There is no hassling, teasing and degrading and if you need to go somewhere you're allowed to'
- positive student/teacher relations-from one, 'I can see there's a developing confidence in this group and I'm sure it's got a lot to do with what you're doing here', and from another, 'It's through [the teacher] as well'
- smaller groups – 'Yeah, I've picked up a lot since I have been here. The smaller groups are far better.'

One of the teachers summed up the positive aspects rather quirkily when he said: 'Nobody has not achieved some change.' This teacher's view is generally a positive one. He is confident with his classroom practice and his ability to organise individualised learning plans for his students. He has clearly established an excellent rapport with his students who in turn credit him for many of their successes.

Both teachers and students make clear that this success is dependent on a number of factors:

- teacher experience
- positive student/teacher relationships
- flexibility
- an adult focus
- a supportive environment
- group cohesiveness
- a small group (maximum ten)
- individualised programs
- an environment that stresses individual success
- understanding emotional as well as academic aspects of students' lives
- a tender price that does not exclude the purchase of resources
- some scope for 1:1 assistance.

These factors are consistent with accepted aspects of good practice in adult education (Pratt 1993; Boud and Griffin 1987). They differ, however, in one significant area-that of choice. One of the central tenets of good practice in adult education has been choice; the LANT program is premised on a lack of individual choice.

Success in such a program, which is in many of cases run on a small budget, with staff who are paid casually and only for the hours they teach indicates how very powerful good classroom practice can be. In half of the sites in this study, staff are subcontracted, a situation that removes the teacher even further from supports. Good classroom practice, then, can transcend even the most difficult constraints. Nevertheless, for the stakeholders, the success of the program is tempered by a number of constraints.

Structural and systemic constraints

Restricted outcomes

Teachers were eager to talk about their successes in the classroom and about positive outcomes for students. Again and again, however, when these teachers were talking about outcomes for students, they lamented the restricted nature of the reportable outcomes as manifested in the mechanism of the National Reporting System (NRS). They have been clear that current reporting methods do not capture the many effective outcomes for students. So the importance of these effective outcomes for students and their importance to the student's ongoing commitment to and success with the program are not documented and acknowledged from DETYA's point of view. One teacher has stated:

> *They've said, oh yes, I've increased my ability to do Maths or to read better or to write better as the case may be. Generally all of those. But what they've also said is, big changes have taken place in me. I'm much more self confident and I feel better about myself and I generally feel better about learning. One guy ... reported that his major feeling about himself was he was now able to help his children do their school work and the kids felt much better about him.*

Another teacher expressed frustration and concern that while these affective outcomes are crucial in terms of the classroom health and personal satisfaction, they are not acknowledged in the narrowly focused outcomes for the LANT program:

> *I mean how can you put a box around someone that at first used to drag their feet and come into class and have their head underneath their hat and have their walkman on so that they literally wouldn't talk to anyone for fairly much the majority of the day to the point where now they come in smiling, happy, ready to begin the day. Even though their achievement levels on paper may not be able to show that, they personally as human beings have grown an incredible amount.*

The compulsory nature of the training

The most controversial constraint of the LANT program and the one that has caused most discussion and passion has been the compulsory nature of the training. The discourse of literacy crisis and the emerging rhetoric of self-help and giving back under the Mutual Obligation Initiative have merged under LANT into a discourse of control and compunction.

How does this highly visible manifestation of power reverberate in classrooms where LANT programs are taking place? There have clearly been changes to the teacher-student relationship in these classrooms as a result. This is not to say that teachers and students usually have symmetrical power relationships but, rather, that the coercive nature of this training has had a dramatic effect in shifting the balance of power and changing the discursive terrain for both teachers and students.

The majority of students felt they had little choice but to be at the program. This was true in particular for the students who were under 18; at one site, this included the whole class. For students who are under 18, and have to be in training as a condition of receiving their Youth Allowance, there are limited choices-return to school or attend a TAFE course or LANT. In small communities, there are often no other choices.

Some were very clear that they were there under duress:

... if I didn't come I wouldn't get paid.

I just turned 16 ... so my family payments got cut off and so we had to find another way for me to get paid and get an education at the same time.

Others said that the compulsory nature was not as concerning because at least it was better than school: 'I think it is great. Better than school.'

The teachers were a lot more explicit about the coercive element of the program that brings the students to the classes:

Some of the lows at times are seeing that some students have been in a situation of not really wanting to be where they are at, due to the fact of being forced or coerced into the program.

They still have to be here. It isn't any different [to school] because they still feel, some (.) anyhow, still feel quite trapped and they have to come or their allowance is going to be cut off, which can have quite a negative effect. On the whole though they have voiced to me that it is much better than school.

I think Centrelink certainly pressures them ... [another teacher] just told Centrelink look sorry these people are uncontactable. Within a week or two they were contactable. So I think you can draw your own conclusions.

Several students expressed a lack of understanding about the relationship between Centrelink and the staff at the training facility, which included the interviewer. This is not surprising as the roles have become blurred and teachers have taken different stances on their level of responsibility for getting students to class. This confusion on the part of students seems to have led to reticence during the interview when students talked about the compulsory nature of the training. Carspecken (1996) makes clear that research participants control what they reveal and what they conceal. Given that teachers feel there is genuine concern that negative responses may affect welfare payments, it is not surprising that students may have chosen what they did and did not say carefully. One of the interviewers expressed an awareness of this when she was interviewing students:

No matter how heavily we disguise ourselves as non-government bodies and totally impartial, I am sure there is still suspicion/prudence which guides responses in such research.

Like the teachers, some Centrelink staff expressed opinions about the negative aspects of a coercive approach:

I mean, okay, yeah, I can force them to do that [attend the program] by cutting their payments and everything else like that, but that's not the way to motivate someone to do it.

It is clear in the data that lack of motivation is a problem for students who feel they have been forced, by whatever means, to come to class:

> *I don't have a problem with the teacher, I don't have a problem with the place it is at, I don't have a problem with any of the other students. I might have a problem with myself.*

It is interesting to note the manner in which this student has internalised the victim-blaming aspect of the Mutual Obligation Initiative rhetoric. He sees his lack of motivation in attending a course to which he has been sent compulsorily as his own fault.

Despite problems with resentment for having to attend a course and the accompanying problems with motivation that result from this situation, students talked of feelings of success in the program. One student summed up this ambivalence when he described his observation of the other students in his class.

> *They sort of don't want to be here but at the same time I know that they can see they're getting a bit of value out of it. So there is a bit of yes and a bit of no.*

Another also alluded to this ambivalence when he talked about his own situation:

> *Well, I was sent here under a Mutual Obligation deal. I virtually had to go and ... that was something [I] probably needed doing for years anyway, you know. Just stayed in the same circle.*

It is apparent that all participants in the research-students, teachers, and Centrelink staff-are touched by the coercive pressure of the compulsory aspect of the program and that this pressure impacts on motivation in the classroom and on classroom relationships.

Changing teacher roles

The new educational discourse of economic imperatives, competitiveness, deregulation of the training market, competitive tendering, increased accountability, and compulsory training has had a profound impact on the role of the teacher in adult literacy education. In addition, the breakdown of infrastructure that accompanied the dismantling of the Special Intervention Program (SIP) has resulted in loss of supports for teachers. Anecdotal evidence indicates that there has also been a loss of experienced teachers to the field.

Teachers in this study indicated varying difficulties in adapting to their new role as 'educational outworkers' (Kell, Balatti, and Muspratt 1997). They have suggested that teacher roles have not so much changed as expanded. Teachers are now expected to include new tasks such as brokerage, negotiation, and liaison into their roles, in addition to the roles they already fulfil. At all three sites in regional New South Wales, a single teacher works alone. The sense of isolation that these teachers feel is heightened by the nature of competitive tendering which serves to weaken the professional culture (Angwin 1992). One teacher explained the tensions in interacting with a 'neighbouring' provider thus:

> *In fact because the tendering process is so competitive we feel in a sense that it's a bit of a closed shop between these providers.*

... because the programs tend to be small ... the individual tutors can be isolated from their flock, if you like, of other tutors and their collegiality and synergistics of groups is probably the biggest weakness I think - and there's a lot of part time work ... I think also that because of the competitive nature of contracts it tends to have an effect that you're on my turf if you go to X and say, I did go down to – well to Y and discuss, you know, we said, well what do you guys do and –

Interviewer: But they're not actually delivering this particular program?

No, but they do in a sense see themselves as a competitor.

Teachers working alone for small providers also have limited resources and limited access to professional libraries (Angwin 1992).

Teachers who participated in this study also felt that an increasing part of their role in LANT programs has become that of salesperson. The prospective students are often reluctant participants and they need courses to be 'sold' to them:

... you try very hard to win them over.

Although we are not the main enforcers, that Centrelink are the ultimate enforcers we do have to do a lot of persuading, a lot of telephone calls.

This sales representative role becomes a more critical ethical issue when students fail to turn up to an initial assessment or drop out of a class and thus breach their agreement with Centrelink. One teacher explained why she goes to great lengths to encourage, cajole, and put subtle pressure on students who do not turn up to class:

Well I guess people feel a sort of moral obligation [to spend a lot of time on follow up] because we know that if we go back to Centrelink and say that students have stopped working then they are going to be breached for a certain length of time.

Students are in breach if they do not fulfil their activity agreements by attending class regularly. The first breach (in a two-year period) involves an 18% reduction of payment for a 26-week period. There is a 24% reduction for a period of 26 weeks for a second breach in two years and an eight-week non-payment for any further breach in this period (McKay 1999).

It is clear that teachers are taking the responsibility to see that students do turn up to class to ensure that they will not be in breach of their Centrelink contracts and lose their unemployment payments. Thus, teachers must take on policing roles despite their discomfort with this role:

It seemed to me that Centrelink had actually distanced itself from these particular individuals and they saw us as kind of the punitive one.

This policing role complicates and compromises the established role of teacher as collaborator and advocate. Students clearly identified teachers in this program as enforcers and vented their frustration and anger on the teachers. One teacher described her dilemma thus:

It was dreadful actually. It was really upsetting. [other teacher] and I were both upset. The students were really upset. They [students who were

breached] rang and abused us and the students were-it was total anti everything-Why are teachers involved in this punitive kind of approach to learning?

This tension in the teacher's role has real implications for program success, particularly for distance education in which relationships are more fragile and harder to forge. Students who breach their agreement by not attending class or completing work and are subsequently reported, feel betrayed by their teachers, while teachers feel enormous guilt and anxiety when they feel they have to inform Centrelink about attendance problems. If trust is to then be rebuilt in these circumstances, it requires the teacher to take sides.

Well I had to grovel. I rang back and I grovelled and I faxed ... and they were reinstated ... we don't want to have to inform on anyone.

Some teachers expressed concern about their involvement in a program that is so overtly political and felt a sense of discomfort at their tacit approval of the coercive elements of the program.

I've had deep, sort of, philosophical objections to the coercive nature of Mutual Obligation, but at the same time, you know, I've met some students over the phone and I've thought this could be a real goer for this person you know.

They were quite vocal in their condemnation of the coercive element of the program but, at the same time, clear that there had been positive aspects for students.

I just found that a very disturbing situation to be embroiled in, this whole process where it wasn't my choice to impose something on this kid who was too confused to know what to do with it anyway.

The relationship with local Centrelink staff has emerged from the data as an important element to the program. For the most part, particularly in the small sites, this relationship has become another responsibility that falls to teachers. This forging of a relationship is a very time-consuming process that adds a burden to already overloaded teachers. It is central, however, to clients' obtaining referrals in the first place and to assist the students in building bridges if they have breached their agreements. Some teachers felt unsure about their relationship with Centrelink staff and where their responsibilities lay. They felt disconnected from Centrelink staff in the same way that they felt disconnected from DETYA. They expressed a lack of understanding of some of Centrelink's processes. One teacher questioned the concept of legitimate excuses for breaching and asked what a legitimate excuse is. Some centres, however, reported positive links with Centrelink.

Even where strong connections to Centrelink have been forged, a lot of sensitivity has been needed to maintain the relationship when the teacher has advocated for students who had breached their agreements. One teacher had no particular complaints about his relationship with Centrelink, but there was evidence that it was a fairly tenuous link.

I guess in that sense [of sending appropriate students] I haven't got many

complaints about what Centrelink has done. As I said I don't really know what their system is.

Another community provider has experienced extreme difficulty in encouraging Centrelink staff to refer students to them. Staff at their local Centrelink seemed to have a bias towards another particular provider. This situation was commented on by students and staff alike:

We've had very few direct Centrelink referrals ... they either heard via a friend or their mother helped them find the information.

I wanted to do a course and Centrelink wanted me to do one also. They wanted me to do one at X, but I come here to find out about one first. One of my friends was doing the course here and she told me about it so, I come in and asked about what courses were available.

Interviewer: So fairly haphazard ways of finding out there's a great literacy and numeracy course happening at [name of centre]?

Yeah, you just can't find it.

It was clear that markedly different views exist on the relationship with Centrelink and its staff. As time has progressed, some of the original awkwardness in the relationship has been smoothed out but there are still uncertainties and confusion about roles and responsibilities in relation to Centrelink staff.

Issues related to communication were not just confined to relations with Centrelink staff. Teachers also talked about communication between providers in situations where provision had been subcontracted and the need for meaningful, face-to-face communications with verifiers. This communication is vital, as is time to listen to students talk about anxieties about their lives outside the classroom. The constraints that have resulted from the encouragement and rewarding of a lowest cost tendering process, however, work against the development and maintenance of these networks.

Verification

Another aspect of the LANT program about which teachers expressed concerns is the verification process. The process involves external verifiers requesting random samples of work from students for examination to ensure that teachers have compatible standards and are fulfilling course outcomes. Teachers felt that this very formal, stressful process was exacerbated because verification was not usually done face-to-face but by the sending back and forth of materials from providers to verifiers.

Verification is a local process. There are only three groups in Australia who have won the tender for verification services. It is usual practice for samples of work to be sent to the verifier. The verifier returns the material and any feedback to the provider and not directly to the teacher. In situations where the work is subcontracted (50% of the sites in this study) this means feedback comes to the individual through a third party. This process can be slow and some teachers considered it to be unfair to receive feedback in this manner.

Administration

LANT programs have brought with them an additional administrative burden. Some of this burden falls on the teachers and some on the program administrators. Descriptions of this additional burden were blunt and to the point – 'cumbersome and nightmarish'. Again, the process of subcontracting has complicated administrative arrangements.

> *... particularly problematic for us because we are subcontracted ... they have to pass on all the literature and the information. It makes it a very laborious and very top heavy administrative nightmare.*

The research shows that while teachers have been doing some fruitful work in classrooms, a question remains about how long they will be able to do this in their new roles as overstretched 'educational outworker' and salespeople, without collegial support, in under-resourced centres, with increasing workloads, with limited opportunities for professional development, and on poorly paid sessional hours before it just gets too hard and many leave teaching. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the exodus from teaching began some time ago. One of the centres in this study has lost two teachers in eight months. Valuable expertise is being lost.

Youth

As a result of changes to benefit conditions for youth and the introduction of the new Youth Allowance (January 1999), LANT providers and teachers have found that they have increasing numbers of students in their classes who are under 18. At one of the four sites in this study the whole class fit this profile; at other sites, there is a mix of Youth Allowance students and Mutual Obligation Initiative clients.

For these young students, choices are more limited. They must be in training to fulfil their activity agreement and training opportunities are limited. They can return to school but many indicate that this is a choice they cannot take. Or they can try to gain access to a mainstream TAFE course but often these courses are difficult to access because places are limited and often have minimum requirements of Year 10 schooling. So for many students, options are very limited and Centrelink staff, parents and friends suggest LANT to them as a way for them to fulfil their agreements and continue to receive their Youth Allowance.

LANT was initially designed as a program specifically for long-term unemployed Centrelink clients between the ages of 18 and 24. When it was broadened to include students outside the designated age bracket, there was no review of the program and its suitability for the under-18 age group. Since there was no change to the parameters of provision, it can be assumed that it was expected that this age group would fit into the existing structure. One of the Centrelink staff described the restricted nature of the choice for youth in the following terms:

The problem has been with, I feel, people not seeing it as a first choice type option for them ... It tends to be that the people that our referrals have probably picked up since January of this year when it became compulsory for Youth Allowance recipients to be in an educational training course. So, for some people it became the only option for them to be eligible for payment. They couldn't get into TAFE. School wasn't an option for them. But still in a lot of those cases it wasn't considered like they really had the, um, desire to do the program, it was, well, I need the money to live on ... There's a reluctance to do it.

It was clear from the interviews of students, teachers, and Centrelink staff alike that for young people in particular who are attending LANT programs, there are broader and more complex issues that cannot be isolated from their educational and training needs. These issues include family conflict and breakdown, homelessness, transience, substance abuse, and access problems such as distance. These broader issues affect their attendance, motivation, and ongoing commitment to the program. Students spoke of some of the restraints:

It's pretty hard to get to the course too. Like I have to get a lift or ride over 60 kms ... It takes an hour and forty minutes on a push bike or I can hitch or get a lift with my mum.

Some restraints were not mentioned by students but teachers and Centrelink staff who have come to know them well indicated an awareness of the breadth and complexity of these issues and their impacts on the classroom.

I mean walking in here unemployed is only part of the problem, you know. There's so many other things that impinge on it.

There are other associated things which are just often youth issues with this particular group that I deal with here, such as the use of drugs and alcohol in the situation being used in times when they are supposed to be in the classroom.

Whereas the younger ones again that may not have even got to year 10, they're going to be a little easier to identify. But generally those kids have got so many other problems as well. It's not just literacy and numeracy. There may be all sorts of learning difficulties and psychological or social, yeah, there's a whole pile of stuff and at 14, 15, 16, 17 you know, you don't think about sorting out your literacy and numeracy.

... there's a young kid ... I think he has moved about half a dozen times since I've been in contact with him.

One teacher explained that all his male students reported having difficulties at school. Negative school experiences were reported widely by students and perhaps summed up most graphically by one student:

I don't get on well with teenagers and I don't get on well in a school environment. The teachers there treat you like crap.

One of the on-site researchers, after interviewing students, said:

... schools hadn't worked for them but they still wanted a school

curriculum minus the teachers, the rules, the buildings, the bullies, the put-downs, the lack of assistance etc.

Fine's (1987) research indicates that students who drop out of school tend to do so in silence. Then they present at LANT programs and an opportunity emerges for them to re-engage with education. Given that these opportunities for re-engagement will be limited and that their commitment to education is fragile (Withers and Batten 1995), the question for educators then is whether this is the best way for re-engagement. The incentives to take part in training are not positive but negative, the outcomes are rigid, and, as a result, the work done in the limited hours (300 or 400 hours per student depending on the level at which they are assessed in the pre-training assessment) must be narrowly focused if the provider is to receive full payment for a successful outcome. This narrow choice of subjects is noted by several students as a limitation of the program. They appeared to be interested in a more broadly based Year 10 alternative, than program options in this region allow. These restrictions were obviously a source of frustration for teachers as well as students. One teacher said he felt he must teach simply towards the outcomes rather than in a more rounded way.

These complex issues, significant in relation to youth in the program, also have relevance to all stakeholders. The larger social, economic and political context within which the training sits affects students, teachers and Centrelink staff alike. There are, however, some specific issues that emerged from this data which are particular to, or amplified for, this age group. They include limited educational options, the need for a broad range of subjects, clearly articulated pathways, and the need for training to be integrated with other services. This integration requires close communication with other agencies. While teachers are paid sessionally, and only for class time, this situation clearly cannot evolve.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence in their research and practice have identified a number of features of labour market programs that they 'consider important for enhancing young people's employment prospects and self esteem' (McClelland et al 1998, 118). These include:

- providing choice
- supervision
- links to ongoing job opportunities
- building on existing skills and aspirations
- accredited and recognised training
- adequate income
- post-placement assistance
- being attuned to the needs of individuals.

There is a need for critical analysis of how the current LANT program sits in such a framework. Research undertaken by Sweet for the Dusseldorp Skills Forum suggests that short term programs are not the answer for ensuring that young people are given access to educational and training opportunities.

Future economic growth, where it is translated into employment growth, almost inevitably will create jobs that favour the qualified, the experienced

> *and skilled. The more appropriate use of public funds would be to invest them in ensuring that young people have the education, training, qualifications, skills and confidence that will enable them to secure employment in the emerging economy. This is a preferable course of action to spending public funds on short term job creation programs that do not necessarily provide these outcomes. Programs such as work for the dole are open to genuine criticism on these grounds (1998, 14-15).*

Early school leavers experience extreme disadvantage (McClelland 1998) particularly in the emerging climate of a declining full-time work base and the growth in marginal part-time work (Ainley 1998). A review of how the LANT program addresses disadvantages for this age group would be timely.

Distance provision

The teachers at the distance provider, where the chance to build up a positive relationship is more difficult than face-to-face, reported the highest degree of frustration with the program. They expressed a lack of engagement with the students and a sense that students were elusive.

> *I think the whole thing is really tenuous. Well look, you know, he's really on board this week but anything could happen. Any sort of personal issue or something might go wrong between us or, you know, I just don't feel secure with any of these students.*

These teachers felt strongly that the compulsory nature of the program made their job difficult and prevented the build up of strong cooperative relationships. Part of any teacher's role is to encourage and perhaps to cajole in the act of engagement but the hard sell reported by both Centrelink staff and teachers is obviously facilitated by the compulsory nature of the program. These problems are amplified with distance.

Yet, while it is possible to put pressure on students to attend class, it is not possible to force students into engagement, commitment, and motivation as one student pointed out:

> *You can't make someone do something even though it is better off for youse guys or whoever is organising it. Like I can understand your side of the story but when it gets down to reality, the reality is you're dealing with people's lives and they have a right to choose what they want to do.*

The difficult job of engagement is left to the teachers, who are themselves operating under tightening restraints.

Issues associated with relevance seem also to be amplified in distance mode. Several of the distance teachers spoke about the struggle to find or make materials that are relevant to their students and to do so within the framework of a syllabus that was designed for English as a Second Language students (CSWE) and adapted by their institution for LANT programs. Students who have failed to see the relevance of the program for them, for whatever reason, have either dropped out (but have often returned rather bitterly once their benefits were cut) or have employed passive and active resistance techniques. One distance teacher

described a student with whom she finally made contact over the phone as 'spectacularly uncontactable'. The student was very polite and answered all the questions relating to his schooling and the necessary questions about his background and then:

> *... he kind of obviously decided that I need educating and he gave me this little speech about the things that he had learnt in his life and how he had learnt things from experience and from watching his father and doing things and, you know he was obviously making a statement that everything he needed to know about fishing and [town] he knew and he'd picked all those skills up, mustering, horse riding, rodeo-ing and all that and so none of this ... [was] relevant.*

Both students and teachers see that the LANT program would be best set in the larger educational context than in the more narrowly conceived 300 or 400 hours for a job context. Teachers have expressed a need to encourage the students to see a bigger picture and to reassess constantly their goals and expectations:

I've said to them, I don't see this as an end to anything. I just see it as a sort of a first step in a long staircase of learning for you and then I've said to them look if I could give you nothing but a feeling that you can learn, I think that I would be most successful.

The future

As a means of foregrounding some of the impacts of LANT on the lives and aspirations of the students, one interviewer asked about their futures. Many of the young students in particular had not associated their attendance at the program with their future. For others, the time in the course had given them a space to think.

Some students articulated plans for their future: for instance, some wanted to enrol in a further course at TAFE, one student was moving into an apprenticeship, and another had been accepted into an alternative Year 12 course. A minority of clients had started the course for a very career-specific reason.

> *I got a boat business with me two brothers and I just came here to pick up all me um NAS measurements because we don't know nothing about metric. We're just doing a boat for Queensland, a big um shark cat rescue boat and I knew nothing about um metric.*

But for many, they were there because their options had run out and it was a way to fulfil their agreements and still be paid. And while some students had very high expectations about what the course would provide, one had a more pragmatic reading of his own situation:

The thing that I found out there's no work in [X]. There's nothing here. You've got to go to Sydney, Melbourne, Newcastle, to Canberra.

As unemployment among the young people in our community remains disproportionately high and job opportunities for early school leavers are shrinking as the nature and availability of work changes, opportunities for the future for students in LANT programs becomes an increasingly critical issue.

Conclusions

As a result of this case study research, which provides a snapshot of perceptions about literacy provision under the LANT program, we know some things about the broader aspects of the students' lives in this study. They are often very young, have fallen, often silently, out of school and have negative attitudes towards it; some are homeless, some are transient, and teachers can lose contact with them very easily. For some, food and safe accommodation needs dominate their lives. In the current climate of declining full time work and growth in marginalised, poorly paid, casualised work, young people have been disproportionately affected.

It is obvious from this research that LANT, under the Mutual Obligation Initiative, is not unproblematic. Literacy cannot be reduced to a jobs discourse and is much more nuanced. Literacy needs cannot be taken out of the context of people's lives and the broader social, economic, and political context. To say the program is not a success, however, would be to underrate the excellent work achieved by students and teachers, work which is clearly illustrated in the data.

A number of issues have been raised by the case study and would benefit from further research and debate. One of these issues is the compulsory nature of the LANT program. In what way does this compulsory element either enhance the educational experiences of, or work opportunities for, students in the program? The Dusseldorp Skills Forum research (1998, 20) indicates that young people need positive incentives to undertake further education and training. The Special Intervention Program (SIP) funding allowed for students to receive a training allowance as an acknowledgement of the extra fares and materials needed to attend class. Such an allowance also served as a positive incentive for these students. Yet the data from this project suggests that the compulsory element has a negative impact on classroom practice and student/teacher relationships.

Other areas where there is a need for further research include youth in training and literacy provision for distance learners in a compulsory climate. Little is known about outcomes, both reportable and otherwise, of the program, particularly since its criteria for eligibility has changed. The absence of articulated pathways into more integrated contextualised vocational training for many of its clients needs to be evaluated.

Further research is also needed into the lived experiences of prospective LANT clients and the ways in which literacy assistance could be integrated with the broader aspects of their lives. A larger research project that takes in sites in other States is indicated, in order to give 'thicker' descriptions of practice and the constraints associated with the program.

For this research to be fruitful, however, there is a need for a broader conceptualisation of literacy than the isolated skills model on which this training is currently premised.

6 LANT and the country learner: a city slicker's perspective

John Stone

In this paper, John Stone profiles a group of learners in a rural-based LANT program from the perspective of the availability of employment opportunities in the region. The paper offers suggestions and strategies aimed at producing positive results for the participants in his program. After a review of his research process and the background of structural changes associated with literacy and employment discourses, the paper examines the social context of the learners and the program itself. The paper then discusses the development of a skills recognition model with a focus on resource and assessment issues. Finally, Stone considers the outcomes of the program-its challenges, problems, and achievements.

Introduction

Literacy and numeracy problems would appear to walk hand-in-hand with unemployment amongst our youth according to government rhetoric. The youth unemployment situation is significant for concerned Australians, particularly those who have had the advantage of choice in selecting a vocation, career, or 'just a job'. Contemporary youth, by contrast, have been placed in a situation that is not of their making. Recession, restructuring, rationalisation, centralisation, and globalisation have conspired to create an environment in which being between 15 and about 25 and having a full-time job is an all too rare combination.

So what does the average literacy teacher do in an attempt to remedy this condition? The research project owes its being to observation of the non-academic skills possessed by the participants attending the Literacy and Numeracy Training (LANT) program that I have delivered. These young men and women have drawn on resources not defined as part of academic concepts of literacy. In observing their 'survival' skills, I decided to research the LANT program by looking at its progressive development in the light of demographics of the arena in which these young people compete and the outcomes demanded by curriculum constraints. As the program has developed, it has become obvious that in order to enhance employment opportunities among the participants it has been necessary to relate the prescribed curriculum to emerging industry-based competencies and existent non-academic skills possessed by this young group.

In this paper, I review the research process and some literacy and employment themes. I then look at the social context of learners from the LANT program that I delivered, such as regional demographics and employment

prospects. After outlining the program, I discuss the need for, and development of, a skills recognition model with a focus on resources and assessment issues. Finally, I consider the outcomes of the program and its challenges, problems, and achievements.

The research process

A review of the demographics of the region became necessary to determine how the prescribed curriculum has had to be reordered to provide meaningful outcomes for the participants. The information has been sourced from regional and local resources. Census statistics, employment agency data, and newspaper articles have served to contextualise employment possibilities and the program's focus. From a contractual viewpoint, it would have been adequate to provide a LANT program that addressed curriculum outcomes that correspond to the Certificate I in Preparatory Education using conventional classroom-based activity. From an employment outcomes perspective, however, the program would best serve the interests of the participants if it focused on regional opportunities.

Pre-training assessment and ranking against the National Reporting System (NRS) indicated similarities in background among members of the participant group. Interviews and verbal responses to a modest, informal questionnaire have provided information about the content and context of the developing program. It was inappropriate to provide the participants with a written questionnaire beyond the degree of difficulty of the pre-training assessment tool for two reasons. First, literacy levels of participants were judged as capable of providing only limited written responses beyond direct yes/no answers to propositions. Second, I considered that it was inappropriate to commit to paper information that could potentially be used against participants. It was more appropriate, I believed, to gain their confidence and trust through direct but informal one-to-one contact and build a background picture of issues that influenced the development of each person's life skills.

A literacy assessment of each participant was carried out to provide the following data:

- identification of language, literacy, and numeracy deficits
- a profile of literacy skills across the target group
- identification of the existence of learning disabilities
- a profile of school-leaving skills and qualification levels
- interests beyond the context of literacy skills acquisition.

The assessments also aimed to promote awareness of the need for training and development of employable skills, to create a training and learning culture, and to establish rapport and an atmosphere of trust to maximise participant involvement. The issues are presented as integrated perspectives of the 'group' in this paper.

I then conducted a limited literature review, which covered some of the current publications specifically relating to the concept of 'mutual obligation'

and the LANT program. Curriculum documents and training package resources have also been explored. Mutual obligation, as a relatively recent government initiative, has yet to produce much critical literature. Literature with a specific rural perspective is also yet to emerge in any quantity.

Finally, I tried to develop a model that would reflect the relationship between the curriculum, life skills recognition, the national literacy ranking system, and qualifications and competencies that were the result of my exploring the regional demographics, student perspectives, and themes in the literature. It is necessary, I suggest, to consider the convergence of these factors in order to provide meaningful outcomes for the participants.

Literacy and employment themes

Two main issues can be identified from the literacy and employment literature. First, employment is affected by regional context and reflects social biases in respect of demographic groupings. Second, literacy has increasingly been defined broadly to include a range of context-specific social competencies.

Former Federal Minister for Science and Technology in the Hawke Labor Government, Barry Jones, offered the following comments on the theme of technology and the future of work:

> *There has been massive failure by politicians, journalists, public servants and the professional economists to look at, let alone recognise structural changes in employment. The following points have been insufficiently analysed:*
>
> ***1. The class nature of unemployment.*** *Unemployment is four or five times more serious in working class areas than in middle-class areas-and the psychological and economic effects are even more damaging, since self-definition and feelings of personal security in the working class are more strongly determined by employment.*
>
> ***2. The regional nature of unemployment.*** *CES [former Commonwealth Employment Service] figures indicate that unemployment is relatively low in inner-city areas or in the suburbs surrounding the inner city, compared to the very high levels in outer suburbs and in country districts-particularly where employment is over-specialised (e.g. factory employment and agriculture) and economies of scale operate against job creation.*
>
> ***3. The ethnic bias in employment.*** *Unemployment rates are highest in areas with highest migrant populations. The lack of language skills is especially serious.*
>
> ***4. The youth bias in unemployment.*** *Young people, especially those who have been poorly educated or specifically trained for jobs where demand is falling, are a glut on the market. The CES reported that in Victoria in July 1980, the ratio of registered unemployed to unfilled vacancies was 41:6 for juniors and 17:6 for adults. In July 1989 the figures (a ratio of 9:1) did not distinguish between categories.*

> ***5. The sex bias in unemployment.*** *Employment prospects for females in city areas are slightly better than the male rate, but in country areas job prospects are poor, especially for juniors. (Jones 1990, 128-9)*

Whilst these statistics may now be dated, the observations by then Minister Jones are still valid, particularly in rural settings. Such issues remain largely unaddressed and undebated outside specific forums within adult education. The participants in the LANT program that I delivered are located in those categories that then Minister Jones indicated as representing the highest unemployment: 'areas with simple infrastructures, a low degree of interdependence between types of activity, low participant rates in higher education, and limited demand for a range of goods and services' (Jones 1990, 146).

Increasingly, pedagogical research on adult literacy and numeracy points to the need for specific literacies and numeracies to be considered in terms of particular social contexts. As Bradshaw notes:

> *literacy cannot be talked about as if it is a monolithic undifferentiated whole, but rather that it needs to be seen as an amalgam of distinctive 'literacies', requiring a range of capacities to read and write texts that have been constructed for quite particular social purposes. (in Lee et al 1996, 6)*

These competencies not only include the more traditional literacy and numeracy skills of reading, writing, and mathematics but, also, those social and personal skills that enable people to function effectively in specific day-to-day contexts (Beazley in Lee et al 1996, 19).

The *National framework for adult English language, literacy and numeracy competence suggests that competence* in any specific activity or at any particular site involves overlapping modes of social action. For example:

> *Mathematics is embodied in language; written language is integral to graphic representation; much mathematic representation is symbolic or graphic; acting orally always involves non-verbal representation; and so on. ... a sales transaction requires, at least, talk between clerk and customer, the reading of labels and calculation of prices, perhaps the writing of a signature or invoice, and a series of non-verbal signals accompanying these actions. (ACTRAC in Lee et al 1996, 78)*

In the worlds that these young people who participate in LANT inhabit, they *are* competent when assessed by their peers. When assessed according to traditional notions of literacy, however, they have not yet achieved competence. It is possible, therefore, for a person to be socially accepted and survive in a range of contexts without 'classic' literacy competence. How can the idea of competence be attributed to these life skills? What form of skills recognition is appropriate?

Regional demographics

I have tried to describe the region in such a way as to document its main

attributes but to protect the confidentiality of the participants and their specific location.

The region covers an area of approximately 11 000 square kilometres and borders marginal agricultural regions of central-eastern South Australia. The population, nearly 34 000 people according to the 1996 Census, is diverse and includes indigenous communities, Anglo-Saxon and European descendants, Middle-Eastern enclaves, Asian immigrants, and individuals who hold multiple citizenship. Forty-five per cent of this population is under 30 years of age and approximately 4.5% of the total population are of Aboriginal descent. The participant group is representative of this ethnic mix.

The unemployment rate of the under-30 age group approximates 22% while the 15-24 age group averages around 28%. This latter figure is lower than the 36% unemployment in the northern metropolitan area of the State but it is approximately 55% higher than the State average of 18%.

The 1996 Census statistics indicate that 14 703 persons were involved in some form of paid employment in the broad occupational categories listed in Table 6.1. Part-time employees in the region represent 54% of all employed persons, compared with the South Australian average of 32.7%.

Professional workers	1490	10.1%
Intermediate clerical, sales and service workers	1636	11.2%
Tradespersons and related workers	1538	10.4%
Associate professionals	1249	8.5%
Other	8790	59.8%
Total	14703	

Table 6.1

Qualification levels represented in the region are, in general, lower than levels in other rural and urban metropolitan communities.

Employment prospects

Local employment centres around farming-broad acre cereals, aridland, sheep, and cattle-as well as vegetables, fruit, viticulture and the processing industries associated with these agricultural and horticultural industries. Service industries, retail, agricultural supplies, support trades, minimal government departmental representation (concentrated in the 'central' township), local government services, variable health care services and a collection of small businesses provide the support infrastructure in the region.

There are some 400 retail establishments in the region and around 1200 small service-based enterprises with seasonal employment at local production facilities of national and multi-national corporations. While these figures indicate

an average of 8-10 employees per enterprise, regionalisation and casualisation restrict opportunities for meaningful full-time employment and the development of career pathways for the majority of the unemployed or under-employed. As an example, consider the local cabinetmaker: how many kitchen make-overs can be done in a year in a region of approximately 10 000 households? Motor mechanics, bricklayers, concrete contractors and so on are all subjected to similar limitations. There is just not sufficient work to ensure ongoing employment across the population in the trades arena. The variability of farming compounds this situation as do seasonally based, casualised, and/or part-time incomes and the constraints imposed on trades-based education by distance. Opportunities for employment as a trainee or apprentice are, consequently, restricted.

There are two main exceptions to this general employment limitation. First, the hospitality industry continues to provide part-time work supported by TAFE and private provider training opportunities. Second, fabricators of stainless steel tanks and pipework for the expanding wine and viticulture industry continue to seek qualified employees. The size of the pool of young jobseekers, however, ensures tough competition for the hospitality positions; success is guaranteed only to the most outstanding aspirants. While in the fabrication industry, an absence of qualified and certified welders and the lack of localised accredited trade training providers for these specialised skills limit potential employment of trainees and apprentices in fabrication activities.

The provision of education services within the region vary in quality and quantity across its breadth but access to this stratum of employment is very restricted. Childcare, kindergarten, primary and secondary schools, and TAFE service the region and provide restricted and casualised employment opportunities for mature-aged support and some teaching, although most teaching and professional positions within these providers are usually filled by personnel external to the region and, mostly, city-based.

In agriculture and horticulture, demand for labour has been minimised by increased reliance on advanced mechanisation, machine pruning, automated irrigation and improved nutrient application techniques and products. Mechanised (and often contracted) maintenance and harvesting of vine crops, increased capacity broad acre crop harvesters, larger tractors, 'wide-blade' cultivation equipment, and some preparation and seeding techniques reduce potential employment opportunities for the young.

The region supports a number of national enterprises, although most of their activities are mechanised, process based, and highly automated. The balance of their operations requires limited formal training; among the available labour, there are some opportunities for selection to meet specific needs. Fruit processing, canning, wine production, and grain milling require minimal labour due to innovative, highly mechanised, robotic techniques or state-of-the-art process design and control.

The remaining businesses are mainly small, family holdings and single-

person enterprises with limited support. These small businesses rely on casual employees to meet seasonal activities like harvesting and pruning. The larger of these businesses tend to employ family members and often sacrifice higher personal incomes to provide meaningful support and disposable income for members of the family. Even the 'family farm' is now severely restricted in its capacity to support the family, however, let alone provide the employment necessary to maintain living standards of the family while sustaining and developing the knowledge and skill base so essential for the maintenance and growth of technical understanding within the industries.

The LANT program

The literacy and numeracy program commenced in May 1999 and numbers increased quickly. Starting with one young man, we now have 16 attending. All suffer the same set of learning problems-coping with secondary school learning having failed continually at primary levels and advancement through grades by default and age increment, rather than by scholastic achievement. These problems are exacerbated by dysfunctional home structures, itinerant childhoods, trouble with the local law enforcement agency, the occasional pregnancy, and drug and alcohol consumption. Most young LANT learners leave school the instant they turn 15. Many leave home at the same time. They have had to become very adept in surviving, despite the odds.

The National Reporting System (NRS), the mechanism by which the learning of these young people is reported (Coates et al 1994-5), seeks to rate their learning strategies. At Level One, for example, we consider their ability to indicate their own immediate learning needs, short-term goals, and related (and preferred) strategies. At the time of assessment, all of this group rated at Level One because they had no clear idea of what their learning needs were, let alone which strategies were appropriate. (By contrast, their survival strategies I would have given a Level Ten.)

The initial task was to break the cycle of failure and to depart from the conventional classroom approach and move into learning activities that might promote real outcomes in terms of employable skills acquisition with supporting literacy and numeracy understanding. For instance, numeracy has invariably been their preference to written exercises. We have used a multiplication square to solve all types of problems. It is a process of learning tables by context rather than by rote and recitation.

To change attitudes, I shifted from questions like 'what type of work would you like to do when you get a job?', which seems to me to be self-defeating when we were well aware there are few jobs for the taking in the region, to questions like 'what do you enjoy doing?' and 'what things are you good at doing?' Responses were invariably negative at first but, by persisting, I have eventually found activities that are acknowledged by the students as being both interesting and something that they can do with some degree of dexterity. At this point, we-the participants and I-have defined some objectives. No attempt

has been made to set targets that are definite in their language. Objectives, on the other hand, presume a degree of flexibility in shape and pathway. As with any adult learning, I have tried to work with their strengths.

There are several problems with this strategy. First, the curriculum prescribed for the LANT program is generic. Resource materials need to be carefully selected to meet both the learning outcomes of the curriculum document as well as the identified needs and interests of the participants. Second, 12 participants means 12 individual study plans to meet individual needs and interest-based outcomes. Clearly, this approach is labour intensive.

One solution, I have found, is to look at learning outcomes that are 'near matches' with employment activities and the professed interests or identified skills of the participants. This approach still requires additional work on the part of the educator, but it means that skills are being matched with industry/employment-demanded competencies. The challenge is then to match literacy and numeracy demand with skill, interest, and employment-enhancing industry competence.

Meeting this challenge places further demands on the LANT educator. If a program is fortunate enough to have contacts with local industry or has a teacher whose skills and experience are supported by work-based training or industry teaching, it becomes easier to map the integration of industry competencies with participant skills and interests.

Development of a skills recognition model

After researching the life skills possessed by this group of young people and the demands made on them to be competent in particular areas, I have developed the following model as a mechanism for framing LANT program content. The model offers a way of giving credit and recognition for skills that the students already possess and those that they have developed in the course of the program.

This model is both democratic and generic in that endorsed industry-based units as well as elements of competence, appropriate range statements, and performance indicators may be represented at any level of skill. The Training Package Certificate descriptors used in the model must represent similar skill levels within the AQF. Similarly, the Accredited Certificate offered by an appropriately qualified RTO must be of that same level. The three shapes representing the skills, competence, and learning outcomes can move laterally across the NRS levels. The shape of these may vary if the qualification, units of competence or learning outcomes span multiple levels defined by the NRS.

The 'zones of recognition', the areas of intersection within the overlapping shapes of the diagram, represent areas of confidence in which the accrediting RTO can award recognition of competence. The zones provide the student with the opportunity to gain skills recognition against each or all of the three 'mechanisms':

- recognition of competence against industry-based competency standards
- credit (perhaps 'advanced standing') for fully completed modules within

Mutual Obligation Literacy and Numeracy Program Skills Recognition Model

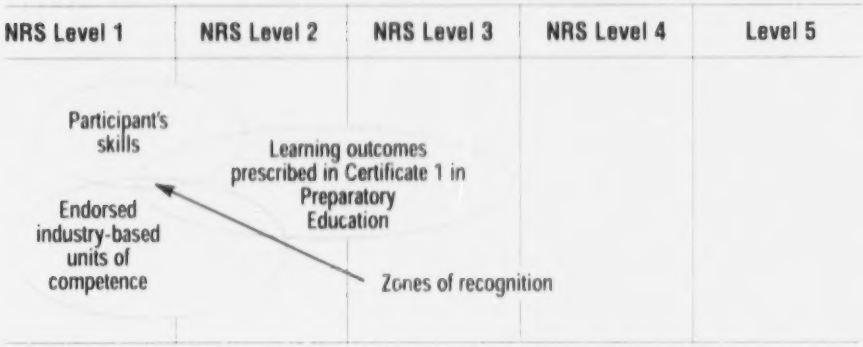

Figure 6.1

Note: The elliptical shapes can extend across or contract within several NRS levels depending on certificate level, competence demand, level of qualification, and the scope of participants' life skills. Certificate I may be replaced by other suitable qualifications recognised within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Registered Training Organisation (RTO) skills recognition and issuance of awards/credit transfer is restricted to completed units of competence and completed modules of training.

an endorsed training package certificate comprising 'bundled' competency standards

- credit for completed modules within an accredited generic certificate course offered by an RTO.

Where learning outcomes of accredited qualifications exceed competencies defined by the relevant training package or certifiable bundles of competence, no overlap will be evident and no zone of recognition will be defined. The student must then be content with the 'next best' offer, such as recognition of individual industry-based competencies and/or bundles of competencies that progress towards the certificate contained within the training package.

Whatever the outcome, the student is the winner because the model provides a means by which to assist in the development and selection of appropriate curriculum and training resources as well as a basis for selection of mechanisms for competency assessment and recognition. It may be applied to recognition of prior learning, current competence, and/or skills recognition. It provides a perspective of the NRS levels that are encompassed by the qualification/industry competencies and a picture of where individual competencies fit in relation to the NRS levels. The model demands the mapping of individual competencies and/or module learning outcomes onto the NRS fields and expansion/contraction of these fields to suit the content of the qualification or bundle of competencies.

Resources used in the LANT program

In the LANT program, we have used materials that reflect the curriculum defined by the Certificate I in Preparatory Education. The most useful of these are the workbooks from the Certificate in Preparatory Education and the Certificate in Workplace Education.

I have also used extracts and competency standards from the training packages in agriculture, hospitality, retail, and engineering. Access to these is restricted to Registered Training Organisations that are authorised to deliver training under the guidelines and scope of registration associated with the relevant package.

In addition, I have drawn on a wide range of other selected materials, including hardware store leaflets, road traffic regulations and driver's licence tests, Centrelink forms, regulations and letters, court summons and traffic infringement notices, light reading materials such as Mills and Boon, literature dealing with pregnancy, motor vehicle repair manuals, and motoring magazines. I also incorporate selected extracts from classic literature, popular novels, and science journals, word and numeracy puzzles, and, finally, music magazines since most of the participants listen to, and enjoy, music.

Assessment

Assessment of literacy and numeracy competencies is a real problem to be addressed in respect of LANT, particularly in association with less commonly accepted forms of literacy. Traditional definitions of literacy and numeracy competence do not include the kinds of literacy required by young people from this group in their daily pursuits and available work opportunities. How literate do you really need to be to work at harvesting grapes or wheat? How does one assess the emerging graphic literacies of surfing the Web and of computers within this narrow framework? The average young person today is quite literate when confronted by an Internet-connected computer and the challenge of using both text and visual format electronic media. Indeed, many of my young LANT students display considerable competence in such graphic literacies and demonstrate computer skills that allow them to access games, the Internet with its music sites and chat rooms, and related video access and manipulation skills.

Gunther Kress has long been campaigning in support of the educational value of graphic literacies in his role as conference speaker, published author, researcher and educationalist. His keynote address to the 1996 VALBEC Conference in Victoria outlined how we might begin to think about visual grammar and its relationship to reader profiles. None of my students 'read' the newspaper extensively but are attracted by photographs and use headlines to maintain their interest in local current affairs. Phillip Adams suggested when speaking at the 'Global Citizenship: Language and Literacies' Conference in Adelaide in July 1999 that images are the new literacy:

people can now read images with an ability and speed that leaves their

> *parents for dead. You see it in their sophistication with video games, the way they will sit and flick through dozens of television programs with the remotes. That speed-up is a form of literacy. It comes with a decrease of classical literacy. They don't read newspapers, they don't watch television news, but they're ranging over this mass of information in every form of input. In many ways they're smart as whips. They're not dumb. They know nothing of context, nothing of history, nothing of the building blocks that were drummed into the generations before them. They know more, but understand less. One form of literacy loses ground, another picks up.*
>
> (The Advertiser 6 July 99, 19)

Our current pre-training assessment process for the LANT program does not adequately identify graphic literacy beyond images in exercises that relate to money and its buying power. Yet students comment that most foodstuffs have elaborately illustrated packaging that enables them to identify contents. Even the generic brands provide little problem in product identification for the shopper. Clearly, graphic literacy needs to be part of the assessment process.

Outcomes

At the time of documenting this research, our graduate total stands at zero. This outcome does not reflect some significant progress that we have made. For instance, 'Jim', a sociophobe, is now more comfortable in group activity and will join in the computer use sessions, although he prefers to pursue his love of cartooning away from the group during 'class' sessions. 'Jenny', a self-conscious, defensive, loner, has enrolled at the local TAFE in a certificate course: she is attempting one module as a kick-start to return to study. 'Brad', a personable, versatile young man without a signature and only basic literacy, has got a work trial at a local metals fabricating workshop on the two days of the week he does not come to class.

These three young people will ultimately 'make the grades' specified by their LANT program guidelines if they hold to the rate of achievement indicated thus far. Even if they do not 'make it', however, the social gains are significant. If they gain an understanding that learning is something that we all do every day of our lives and appreciate that they have life skills that are portable and powerful, the time and effort supported by this initiative is worthwhile. Gains in self-esteem are already evident in this group of learners, although these gains are not readily evidenced by assessment according to the NRS.

Conclusion

So how do we assess our students so that they can rightly claim competence that counts toward getting a real job? My response in the LANT program has been to shift from selective, industry-oriented competence-based literacy modes towards life skills and social literacies. I have tried to align the assessment documents to satisfy the prescribed curriculum.

Our task as educators is larger than merely teaching literacy and numeracy

to assist in gaining employment and there perhaps lies the greatest of challenges for both participant and mentor-not to become so absorbed in the practice and rigour of curriculum that we lose sight of the value of social literacies in the fabric of our communities.

7 Mutual Obligation: who's paying?

Philippa Granwal

This paper examines issues of payment for students who receive LANT training at a public provider while being case managed by private Job Network agencies. Granwal seeks to ascertain the accuracy and implications of anecdotal evidence that federally funded Job Network agencies have not been paying for the literacy/numeracy training that their clients have received at State-funded public education providers. The paper considers the limitations to the processes of accountability in monitoring referrals and offers some suggestions for protection of LANT providers.

Introduction

This research project focuses upon issues of payment for students who have been receiving language and literacy training at a large urban TAFE in New South Wales while they have been case managed by private Job Network agencies. The research has been undertaken against a background of increasing implementation of the Mutual Obligation Initiative and concurrent budget cuts to TAFE by the State Government.

The paper first examines the Mutual Obligation Initiative that has been implemented by the Federal Liberal-Coalition Government. The initiative requires the unemployed to undertake activities in reciprocation for their receiving government financial assistance. The activity that this paper addresses is the Literacy and Numeracy Training (LANT) program. The paper focuses on referral by Job Network agencies of clients to TAFE for language training.

The paper then discusses the trigger for the research – anecdotal evidence that concerned accountability in respect of payment by private Job Network agencies to public LANT providers. The research process is outlined, including some constraints, before a discussion of the research findings. Finally, some suggestions for protection of LANT providers are offered in the conclusion.

What is the Mutual Obligation Initiative?

During the past ten years, unemployment has been of serious concern both to the community at large and to affected individuals. The Federal Liberal-Coalition Government has implemented a number of training initiatives, including the Mutual Obligation Initiative, which came into operation in May 1998.

An objective of this initiative has been to provide people aged 18-24 with opportunities for meaningful work and training in exchange for the unemployment benefit that they receive. Change has been a feature of the initiative, however, and, by 1999, the age parameters had been extended to include all clients in receipt of social welfare benefits.

The Mutual Obligation Initiative is complicated. Clients are initially assessed by Centrelink and categorised according to employability and length of time out of work. Some clients, particularly those designated long-term unemployed, are then referred to a Job Network agency – a private, religious, or secular community organisation that tenders for contracts from the Federal Government to assist the unemployed to access training and work. These agencies are paid according to the estimated difficulty of placing a client in a job: the greater the barriers their clients face in obtaining employment, the more the training dollars provided to the Job Network agency for them. As a memorandum (4 June 1999) from the Assistant Director-General, Industry Services, DETYA, to TAFE directors indicates:

> *The amount varies according to the degree of difficulty of placing the person in employment but a rough rule of thumb would see a job ready, short term unemployed, person attracting a fee of about $350-$500 while a long term unemployed person with other factors of disadvantage might attract a fee of $5,000-$8,500.*

At Centrelink and at the Job Network agencies, clients are offered options including actual work, such as the 'Green Corps', which carries out community conservation projects, other voluntary work with non-profit organisations, or training of some kind. One of the options is literacy and numeracy training (LANT). If clients choose work, they receive payment that is above the level of the dole but less than they would earn in a 'real' job.

A great deal of monitoring takes place of the clients who are part of the Mutual Obligation Initiative. Punitive measures are in place for clients who fail to avail themselves of the training and work 'opportunities' in which they are required to participate. These measures range from warnings in respect of missed appointments, absences from training courses, or failure to attend work to a reduction of benefits for varying periods of time and, ultimately, the cessation of social welfare payments.

The LANT program

The federally funded LANT program offers literacy and numeracy training to clients whose skills in these areas have been deemed inadequate for their getting a job. After assessment, the clients are referred to an appropriate training provider, including TAFE, which offers both State-funded English language training as well as being one of the recognised providers of the federally funded LANT program.

Seventy-five per cent of places in the LANT program are reserved for people of English-speaking background (ESB). The Director, Literacy and Numeracy Section, DETYA, has provided the following advice to LANT providers (15 September 1999):

> *The Literacy and Numeracy program [LANT] is not an ESL program and while we are able to allocate approximately 25% of training places to students from a Non-English speaking background (NESB), the focus of*

> *the program is primarily on literacy and numeracy skills development ... In some areas the number of NESB students appears to be greatly in excess of the average figure of 25%. Although the 25% is not meant to be rigidly imposed on each area and is a national figure, it is nevertheless an important parameter for the program which has been set by Government.*

It might be argued that it is a little difficult and, perhaps, even arbitrary, to separate literacy and numeracy difficulties from those associated with a lack of language. People of non-English-speaking background whose lack of English language skills constitutes a severe literacy and numeracy problem for them but who are excluded from the LANT program can, however, be designated 'long-term unemployed with severe barriers to employment' (Flex-3) clients. They can then be referred by Centrelink to a Job Network agency, which becomes responsible for their case management which directs them towards employment.

The trigger for this research

At enrolment for the second semester in July 1998 – the first enrolment after the Mutual Obligation Initiative was implemented in May 1998 – the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) department at the research site noticed a change in the demographics of its students. There was a dramatic increase in the number of students seeking low-level English classes, especially those with a literacy focus. This pattern was repeated at enrolment for the first and second semesters of 1999 and it was also experienced at other neighbouring campuses.

At the same time as this enrolment pattern was emerging, funds were being cut by the State Government from the TAFE budget. Staff, concerned about the effects that these cuts were having on the public education system, were simultaneously being urged to think of ways in which TAFE could become more self-supporting. TAFE management had become aware that there were training dollars attached to students' entry to TAFE via the Job Network agencies and that TAFE was providing training for increasing numbers of these students.

It appeared, however, that no money seemed to be being paid on their behalf to TAFE by the Job Network agencies, so TAFE management sought to clarify the situation in respect of payment of fees to training providers by these agencies. All TAFE managers received the following response from DETYA's Assistant Director-General, Industry Services, in a memo (4 June 1999), which, after setting out the fees that Job Network agencies might receive for their clients, states:

> *The use of the funds is entirely at the discretion of the contracted agency although there would be an expectation that part of the funds would be used to purchase vocational or job seeking skills training.*
> *However it is clearly in the commercial interests of the contracted agency to minimise the amount spent in making a person job ready and placing them in employment. This means that if a person can be placed in an existing TAFE course as a private individual then the contracted agency*

only needs to pay the TAFE administration fee via the individual concerned. The agency then pockets the difference between what they might have paid for the contracted training place and the admin[istration] fee.

There appears to be very little that TAFE can do about this situation. The individual can hardly be turned away [TAFE operates under a Charter of Access and Equity] and the agency is under no obligation to pass on any part of their fee for service.

Indeed it would be impossible for TAFE to even monitor the placement of Job Network referred individuals unless the Job Network agency volunteers the information that they have referred the person to TAFE.

Familiar with TAFE's difficult financial situation and the potential source of funding available through LANT provision, I thought it would be useful to ascertain how many people were being referred to TAFE by Job Network agencies. At the time of undertaking the research, I was unaware of the existence of this memorandum and sought to ascertain information about referrals from the students.

The mainly quantitative research gathered data in two phases. First, I conducted an initial survey, which was administered by each class teacher. I followed up the surveys with short interviews of selected students, which I conducted myself.

The initial survey sought to obtain three kinds of information:

- was the student registered with Centrelink?
- was the student registered with a Job Network agency?
- how had the student heard about the LANT class that they were currently attending?

The follow-up interview was carried out with selected students who had answered 'Yes' in the survey to the question, 'Are you registered with a Job Network agency?'. It sought to check that these students who had said that they were registered with a Job Network agency had understood and answered the survey question correctly. The interview tried to carry out a very limited assessment of the quality of the relationship that these students had with their case managers, especially in terms of linguistic comprehension and personal understanding. I also attempted to ascertain how many of these clients had been told to come to TAFE by their Job Network agency but had never been referred officially for assessment or been paid for out of the training funds provided to the agencies for them.

Constraints associated with the research

The project has been constrained in a number of ways. Some of the constraints affect the implications that can be drawn from the research.

The survey was only undertaken in the ESOL department of the research site because of time and staff constraints. This restriction is despite anecdotal evidence that suggests that a similar situation may exist in other departments, such as Adult Basic Education.

Some teachers were concerned that students, already anxious in their dealings with Centrelink, might be caused further worry by having to answer the questionnaire. Teachers' concerns were allayed after I explained that I had no desire to target individuals in classes or the Job Network agencies themselves but to scrutinise the referral part of the process in the context of the Mutual Obligation Initiative. I also made it clear that the findings would in no way disadvantage students who had been covertly referred by Job Network agencies. Teachers, worried by the State funding cuts that had resulted in the loss of classes and subsequent disadvantage to students who found themselves on waiting lists, readily understood the need to begin gathering data on the implementation of the initiative and LANT provision in relation to the initiative's claims. Non-payment of money by Commonwealth-funded Job Network agencies could represent a disadvantage to TAFE providers in an economic climate that increasingly requires entrepreneurial roles of those providers. In the end, all teachers cooperated.

Only people who were in class on the days that the survey was administered and the follow-up interview carried out have been included in this research. No subsequent attempt has been made to contact initial absentees, so to this extent the data is limited but random.

In addition, due to a variety of circumstances, the students were being interviewed up to the last week and day of teaching for the semester, which is, unfortunately, a time when numbers have usually decreased to some extent. The number of people available for interview who had indicated that they were registered with a Job Network agency was, consequently, reduced.

I experienced significant difficulty with the extremely low-level English of some of the students. Several students in the lower classes had an International Second Language Proficiency Rating (ISLPR) of between 0 and 1⁻. At these levels, either no communication is possible or information of only the most basic and commonplace nature can be gained. These language proficiencies made meaningful interviews with these students extremely difficult and cast some doubt on the accuracy of their answers on the initial questionnaire. In some cases, of course, their literacy may have been better than their oracy.

Finally, I have only the word of the students that what they wrote on the form and what they told me in the interview is true. I have made no attempt to check the veracity of the information with either Centrelink or the Job Network agencies.

Research findings

The initial survey of students who attending 14 English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes at the research site was carried out in September 1999. I received questionnaire answers from 185 students. Of these 185 students, eight (or 4.32%) did not respond to the question, 'Are you registered with a Job Network agency?'. Of the remaining 177 students, 108 (or 61%) reported that they were registered with Centrelink. Forty-six of these 108 students (or 24.86%) said they were also registered with a Job Network agency. In this initial survey, then, approximately 25% of the students who had answered the questionnaire said that they were registered with a Job Network agency.

In the second phase, interviews were carried out with 26 (or approximately 51%) of the 46 students who had said that they were registered with a Job Network agency. It would appear that at least 17 of the 26 students interviewed (approximately 65%), or about 10% of all surveyed students undertaking language and literacy training at the research site in semester two in 1999, were being case managed by a Job Network agency and, thus, would have training funds attached to them. The number is actually likely to be much higher given that only 50% of those who identified themselves as being registered with a Job Network agency in the initial survey were interviewed. Also, in some cases, the low oracy of the students made meaningful interviews about their status as Job Network clients impossible to determine. This kind of client is very likely to be Flex-3 and, consequently, is likely to be case managed by a Job Network agency, which may further increase the numbers of students who attract funds.

The interviews indicate that Job Network agencies are omitting to have some clients' needs formally assessed by a trained assessor and/or are advising clients to present themselves for training at TAFE as independent individuals rather than as people who are registered with a Job Network agency. Anecdotal evidence regarding the practice of covert referral would appear to have been substantiated.

This kind of covert referral is unlikely to be confined to this particular TAFE provider. Indeed, further anecdotal evidence of the occurrence of this practice in other States was reported by participants at the national ALNARC forum in Melbourne in February 2000.

Conclusion

It would seem that the principle of 'user pays', which the Federal Liberal-Coalition Government defends so vigorously, does not seem to be operating in respect of some aspects of the Mutual Obligation Initiative. There do not appear to be sufficiently stringent mechanisms in place to ensure that Job Network agencies be accountable in referring their clients for assessment and in paying the LANT providers for their referred clients. The findings, although part of a small research project, suggest that a covert practice of referral is being used by some Job Network agencies and that there are gaps in the trained assessment of LANT clients before they access LANT classes.

The DETYA memo outlines how a lack of proper controls can result in thousands of federal training dollars not finding their way into State education coffers. As a result, State education systems are forced to subsidise the federal employment and training program.

Much has been said by its creators about the benefits of the Mutual Obligation Initiative and the improved performance of the private Job Network agencies over the previous public Commonwealth Employment Service. It would seem, however, that questions need to be asked as to why Job Network agencies are not paying what they should. Are they not paying as a way of making profits or because such payments would compromise their tender costing and render the agencies financially unviable? Either way, the true cost of effective literacy/numeracy training needs to be acknowledged and remedial action needs to be taken to avoid the advantage to private agencies at the expense of the State-funded public education system.

It is possible that some legal changes may be necessary to clarify the payment for referrals relationship between private Job Network agencies and public LANT providers. Such changes could include the legal requirements that Job Network agencies must provide comprehensive initial assessments of their case-managed clients who require English language training and that Job Network agencies must pay the training provider for literacy/numeracy training of their clients. Failure to carry out either of these steps should be grounds for non-renewal of Job Network contracts by the Federal Government. Such measures would go some way to addressing the current loop-holes that enable covert referral by Job Network agencies and the subsidisation of provision by LANT providers like TAFE.

8 Mandatory participation in literacy/numeracy programs for unemployed young Australians: whose interests are served?

Sarah Lindfield-Ide

This paper presents research on the LANT program in the early months after the introduction of the Mutual Obligation Initiative. The paper critiques the prevailing perspective of the Federal Government that Australia is facing a literacy crisis and offers some insights into the political and economic contexts that have prompted the introduction of mandatory literacy and numeracy training. Lindfield-Ide reflects on the underlying definitions of literacy in the government policy and argues for a broadening of the literacy spectrum to include critical literacy, oral communication skills, and computer literacy, as part of her review of curriculum, assessment, and student-based learning issues that arise from her research findings.

Introduction

The Federal Government's initial literacy/numeracy program for unemployed people aged 18-24 was implemented in August 1998, as a component of the mutual obligation 'Work for the Dole' principle. Young people who had been receiving unemployment benefits for more than six months were identified by Centrelink and offered a range of activities with either a work focus, education and training focus, or community service focus. If they chose the literacy/numeracy program, their competency and recommended hours of tuition were to be determined by a pre-assessment using the National Reporting System (NRS).

According to McKenna (1999), the literacy/numeracy program was the least attractive mutual obligation option due to its length and intensity. The referral process through Centrelink was extremely slow, and the number of active participants was so low that it became financially unviable for providers to continue with the program. In order to avoid the embarrassment of paying out contracts by June 1999, the Federal Government announced that the program was to become mandatory for those assessed as having literacy/numeracy skills below the accepted national standard.

Since its inception under the Federal Government's Mutual Obligation Initiative, the Literacy and Numeracy Training (LANT) program has been expanded to include people outside the 18-24 age group (Reith and Newman 1999). Abbott (1998) indicates that of the 13 000 places available in the Work for the Dole project, some 20% of places will be available to older unemployed

people. Minister for Education, Dr David Kemp, has sought to broaden access to literacy and numeracy assessment and training to 'all unemployed people who have poor literacy and numeracy skills, who are on Youth Allowance or Newstart Allowance, and to sole parents participating in the Jobs, Education and Training (JET) Strategy' (1999a).

This project seeks to examine a range of issues associated with this controversial government initiative. My inquiry is presented in three sections. First, I examine the political and economic issues that have given rise to mutual obligation. I then discuss the 'literacy crisis' and whether this concept is plausible justification for the introduction of mandatory literacy/numeracy training. The inquiry then moves on to consider issues of curriculum, assessment, and student-centred practice for literacy and numeracy programs. This section of the project aims to consider how education and training should be framed for adult literacy and numeracy participants, based on participant feedback, and whether constraints in the tender have compromised teaching at all. In the conclusion, I offer some suggestions based on the findings of the research.

The economy and industrial reform

During the past twenty years, the tendency towards global capitalism has led to the restructuring of industry in developed countries. In Australia, there has been a drive – by government and industrial leaders – to create a clever, more literate workforce in the belief that this will lead to a more economically productive country (Bessant nd, 10). The Workplace Reform Agenda has resulted in the introduction of industrial quality standards to increase efficiency and productivity, the identification by industrial leaders of specific competencies required by workers in a particular industry, the demand for greater accountability, and a less hierarchical, more collaborative workplace structure.

Administrative reform has also occurred in the public sector, which has experienced a shift towards what is commonly referred to as 'corporate managerialism' – a phenomenon 'characterised by, among other things, a focus on targets and outcomes, reporting systems against performance indicators, strategic planning and performance based contracts of employment' (Wickert 1999, 1).

It would appear that the economic imperative has become the dominant focus in literacy and numeracy provision, so that values other than economic advancement are secondary issues. Decisions about educational expenditure are currently justified in cost-benefit terms, because education is now regarded as an investment that must provide value for money (Psacharopoulos 1985, 23) and which, it is assumed, will lead to economic growth due to a better educated workforce.

Although the need for economic restructuring may be necessary, as Foley argues, economic rationalism as a growth and 'free market' ideology 'blatantly represents the interests of the strong' (1993, 48). Narrow vocationalism perceives education to be both cause of and potential solution to the economic crisis, an

ideology that works for the benefit of the more powerful sectors of the community, such as large corporations, senior public servants, and the professionals of the middle class by providing government and industry with a scapegoat for Australia's unemployment woes and the justification required to exert considerable influence over the education system in the push for vocationalism and 'back to basics' (Foley 1993, 54). This ideology underpins the mutual obligation LANT program.

Unemployment

In Australian society, as in other English-speaking industrialised nations like the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, we have experienced a move away from full employment and from government intervention and generous funding for social services towards international competitiveness, deregulation, privatisation, high youth unemployment, and lower government spending on social services. Foley (1993, 54) argues that the major shift in national wealth from labour to capital has brought with it a decline in the quality of life for most Australians and created marginalisation for large sections of the population which are now emerging as a new underclass. Marginalised groups include migrants, women, youth, Aboriginal people, unemployed, disabled, and elderly persons. This underclass is characterised by low income, insecure employment, and inadequate welfare. These groups are over-represented in the mandatory literacy/numeracy program.

From the mid-70s, with a growth in youth unemployment, government expenditure has been directed away from job creation schemes towards vocational training for unemployed teenagers. In 1991, the Federal Keating Government introduced the 'Active Employment Strategy', whereby unemployment benefits were replaced by a Jobsearch Allowance in the first year of unemployment and a Newstart Allowance for those unemployed for one year or more (Black 1995, 22). The latter program made links between benefits paid to unemployed people and the active preparation needed for future employment through appropriate education and training programs (Dawkins 1991, 15). Clients found to be disadvantaged in the labour market by literacy, ESL, or numeracy needs were to be assisted to develop these skills, along with other vocational skills. Clearly, the LANT program deviates from this original vision because it fails to assist the development of 'other vocational skills'.

The concept of mutual obligation originated in the conditions of Newstart. Government support, through welfare benefits, labour market programs, and other services, was to be complemented by the concept of reciprocal obligation; that is, clients must take up 'reasonable' offers of assistance and contribute to the improvement of their employment prospects (Black 1995, 22). As Black states,

> *In some cases, clients may only be required to undertake active job search, but in others it may be reasonable to expect the client to participate in labour market programs or other activities likely to improve their chances.* ***To reinforce this, the CES has been given the authority to cancel***

> ***Jobsearch and Newstart allowances if clients breach their reciprocal obligations*** (1995, 22, my emphasis).

The Special Intervention Program (SIP)[1] tutors were cynical about the political motivation inherent in these conditions (Forbes 1996, 137). As Forbes suggests, SIP funding as a temporary crutch to a person's obligation to earn a living by being actively employed presumes the right to have a job (1996, 137).

Literacy and numeracy training

According to McKenna (1999, 6), Australia had a coordinated national response to providing literacy and numeracy education from 1990 until 1996, through the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP), which explicitly addressed measures to provide access for adults to literacy and numeracy programs. At that time, literacy was constructed as an employment skill that was linked to improved economic performance (Kell 1998, 10, 29). Workplace literacy – that is, basic literacy skills required for the individual to function effectively in the workplace – emerged as a tool to be utilised for micro-economic reform and a resource that merited investment.

The effect of the globalised world economy on government policy towards literacy is reflected in the ALLP. Forbes (1996, 131) states,

> *[w]hile the White Paper [ALLP] does acknowledge that literacy is of 'importance to the individual Australian's personal, social and cultural development', its main thrust is a conceptualised vision for a more dynamic and internationally competitive Australian economy.*

When the Federal Howard Liberal-Coalition Government came into power in 1996, the SIP program was abolished and mechanisms for cooperation between the Commonwealth and State authorities on adult literacy and numeracy provision ceased (McKenna 1999, 6). McKenna (1996) highlights the need for a coherent national policy and claims that the present LANT program is reductive – a modified version of SIP rather than a new initiative.

Since the 1990s, the education system has focused on subject areas which, it is assumed, will produce individuals with the 'competencies' to contribute to increased economic production. In 1993, the National Board of Employment Education and Training (NBEET) published *Incorporating English language and literacy competencies into industry standards*, which recommended that workers required 'communication skills development' in order to meet the needs of industry restructuring and that models were required to integrate English language and literacy with industry competency standards (Kell 1998, 18). The National Framework of Adult English Language and Numeracy Competence (1994) and the National Reporting System (1995) were developed to integrate competency-based training with the diverse needs and training settings of literacy students (Kell 1998, 19).

1 From 1990 to 1996, provision for literacy training of unemployed people mainly came under the Special Intervention Program, a Federal Government labour market initiative.

The National Reporting System (NRS) enables providers of adult ESL and ALBE courses to report on student learning outcomes in a nationally consistent format (Kell 1998, 21). These 'statements of outcomes' relate to student achievement in the areas of reading, writing, oral communication, numeracy, and learning strategies. The NRS reporting proforma provides a useful starting point for teachers to negotiate further learning or study options with the student[2]. Providers use the NRS to report pre- and post-training assessments of participants in the LANT program.

TAFE traditionally provided adult literacy programs, but the Federal Government considered these programs to be not only expensive but also inflexible to the needs of industry and consequently reduced available funding. The deregulation of State involvement in economic operations, coupled with a downsizing of the public sector, has given rise to a competitive, open training market in which TAFE has necessarily become commercialised and corporatised in order to compete. TAFE thus no longer holds a monopoly on literacy provision and now competes with private providers.

In addition, the Federal Howard Government's implementation of 'user choice' ensures that the user – that is, employers and industry – can select a preferred training provider from the open training market and has significant power in determining the nature and character of training (Kell 1998, 14-15). This provision not only provides industry and government with the means of reducing expenditure (economic rationalism), but, due to the push for 'back to basics' and competency-based training, also deprives adults of a general basic education. Thus, literacy training effectively becomes a form of 'gate-keeping'. Clearly, this policy serves the interests of the powerful.

A literacy crisis or an economic crisis?

Freebody and Welch (1993, 209) note that the current literacy 'crisis' in Australia is not peculiar to this country but is a generalised construction of Western nations. Countries such as the United States, Great Britain, and Canada are also feeling the effects of a globalised economy and a technological revolution, which are causing many jobs to disappear. By comparison, in Australia in the 1950s, many people left school at an early age with limited literacy skills but there was no literacy crisis because there was no unemployment problem (Luke 1996). Our present 'crisis' therefore needs to be considered in the context of changing economic conditions and high unemployment rates, especially among young people. The literacy crisis is a political response to an economic crisis, which, according to Black (1994, 9), affords rightist governments 'enormous scope to manipulate public opinion and, in doing so, enforce their own agenda'.

I would argue that the Federal Howard Government's policy of obligatory literacy training for unemployed young people in Australia serves the following

2 An approximate guide: Level 1 = Stage 1 CPE; Level 2 = Stage 2 CPE; Level 3 =IVEC. If a student achieves 1 in 'writing', he/she should be in Stage 1 CPE, even if 2 is achieved in other areas.

ideological purposes. First, it is an attempt to convince the public that the unemployed (and not the government) are responsible for their situation. If the government can also point the finger at teachers for failing to provide students with adequate literacy skills required for employment, then attention is focused away from the poor performance of government and industry in providing jobs for young Australians. Second, it provides a means whereby the government is seen to be actively doing something about the unemployment problem by educating people to make them 'employable'. Third, it promotes the myth that improved literacy will bring rewards in the form of employment and greater economic productivity. Improved literacy will not provide employment for people, however, if jobs do not exist. Furthermore, programs which focus on 'back to basics' and workplace literacy to the exclusion of a broader range of literacies ensure that only the requirements of industry (for a compliant, 'competent' workforce) are addressed. Consequently, as Wickert (1993, 37) argues, literacy training provides a gate-keeping purpose to serve the interests of the powerful by maintaining the status quo of class, race, and gender.

According to Reid (1999), the Federal Government's literacy policy is based on four assumptions:

- the major reason for people's experiencing difficulty in finding employment is a lack of literacy skills
- the unemployed are at fault for not having jobs
- literacy is defined in narrow terms as the ability to read and write
- 'illiteracy' can be fixed by attendance at a compulsory course.

Reid also suggests that the direction of funds towards the Mutual Obligation Initiative is to remedy expenditure cuts to education. This approach relies on a strategy of 'individualising the problem', which shifts the blame and responsibility for unemployment to individuals for failing to motivate themselves to learn within a government-funded system that is geared towards middle class, white Australians and lacks appropriate resourcing to cater for the needs of children from marginalised groups (Freebody and Welch 1993, 218-9). Government is thus absolved of failing, in the first place, to allocate sufficient funding for the education of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and, in the second place, to ensure (together with the leaders of industry) that employment opportunities exist for young Australians.

Changing literacy demands

The ALLP companion volume (Dawkins 1991) suggests that literacy demands are not an issue of falling standards but of rising expectations (1991, 38). Our current 'crisis', I would argue, is unlikely to be caused by individual deficiencies but is possibly related to the rapid pace of technological change (although this change only impacts on some jobs), the globalised world economy, and the current 'employer market', in which higher formal education credentials are required due to competition for limited jobs. In September 1997, the Australian Bureau of Statistics released data compiled during the *Survey on aspects of*

literacy. The findings, as ACAL (1999, 4) reports, indicate that, while nearly 50% of Australian adults can be expected to have difficulty with everyday demands for information processing, the unemployed have greater difficulty than those in the workforce. In addition, the findings suggest that these literacy difficulties seem to increase with age (except for the 15-19 age group). Difficulties for NESB migrants are particularly critical.

The ACAL statement indicates that people in the 15-19 age group have less difficulties with literacy than older people. With no coherent national literacy and numeracy policy linked to employment, training or general education initiatives (McKenna 1999, 7), however, the Federal Government response to the ABS survey findings has been to introduce the LANT program, which initially targeted unemployed people in the 18-24 age group. A joint media release by Ministers Reith and Newman (1999) indicated that an estimated 10 000 unemployed people in the 18-24 age group will participate in LANT programs under the Mutual Obligation Initiative in the years 2000-01 for up to two semesters involving 6-15 hours of activity a week. It is clear that, in targeting young adults, the government has ignored the literacy needs of older unemployed people, who, according to the ACAL report (1999, 4), appear to be in greater need than the younger group. Why have older unemployed people been overlooked?

A recent study in Australia by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (Ainley 1998) revealed that the youth unemployment rate is 11.9%, which is almost double that of the rest of the adult population. It would appear that there are more older people with some form of employment (regardless of whether they have literacy difficulties), which renders them less of an embarrassment to the government's unemployment statistics. By drawing attention to young people as being responsible for their own inability to obtain employment, the government, I would argue, is able to deflect public attention away from the gaps in government and industry job provision.

Providers speak about LANT programs

While in the 1970s and 1980s, much literacy provision was underpinned by liberal humanistic notions of student-centred education geared towards meeting individual needs associated with personal and academic development (Shore 1993, 16), the driving force in policy provision is now that of 'corporate federalism', which ensures that education serves the interests of capital. Consequently, the funding of literacy provision is tied to the national economic agenda, whereby the drive to attain competencies required for the workplace overrides concern to provide adult students with a humanistic general education. The Federal Government's recent tender document (DEETYA, 1998) exemplifies an unashamedly 'economic rationalist' approach in its drive for a 'back to basics' curriculum, which views the person as an economic unit. Under SIP, payments to the provider were based on further education or employment outcomes achieved

during the program (McKenna 1999, 6). The tender document, however, defines a successful outcome as:

> *progression to the next NRS level in **all** indicators of Competence for **one** of the Reading, Writing or Numeracy macro skills, together with progression to the next NRS level in **at least one** Indicator of Competence for each of **two** of the Reading, Writing or Numeracy macro skills'*
>
> (DEETYA 1998, 7)

This progression must be achieved within a specified time frame of no more than 300-400 hours (depending upon the participant's starting competency level on the NRS), upon which a final payment of 20% of the provider's fee is dependent. Comments from providers from the questionnaire data in respect of set outcomes locked into a time frame and linkage of final payment to measurable outcomes include:

> *a problem-400 hours will not be enough time to address all the problems should be able to extend weeks for special circumstances*
>
> *It makes you cautious about grading high rather than low. It makes it difficult for the occasional client whose skills are very uneven, eg Year 12 or University for English and NRS 1 for maths. These clients will **never** be able to satisfy the requirement to improve in the other two macro areas-unless they are NESB*
>
> *everything must be done within some sort of framework-so I think this is reasonable*
>
> *The allotment of hours is a good idea [as it] gives us and clients an aim. However, those with very low skills may not make it to the next level-should they be allowed to re-enrol for a second time? This would also assist the program-no outcome for the first enrolment but into the next level in the second enrolment.*

Another possible constraint, external moderation as part of the assessment process, is seen by one provider as 'a good thing'. Other comments suggest that this moderation is threatening and only useful if moderators supply exemplars of assessments and their interpretation of NRS levels.

Clearly, some students and some providers will be disadvantaged by these constraints. One provider states that a successful outcome should include acceptance into a higher level of training (as was the case with SIP) and that this program has provided participants with a 'work ethos' in which they can 'earn' their pension. Another provider suggests that the tender has been constructive because it gives 'early school leavers a second chance by providing a caring, friendly, supportive learning environment [which is] non-competitive and is at a level where they can experience success'. Of concern is a lack of consideration about what will happen to participants after they finish their training and move beyond classroom walls into industry: will their situation genuinely improve or will they find that they are now merely better educated unemployed people, who are still regarded by many in the community as being responsible for their inability to get a job?

In response to the question 'Do you feel that good practice for teaching adult students is compromised in any way?', providers comment in the following ways:

> *Working collaboratively within the framework of individually tailored training plans is our aim. We do not find our literacy/numeracy students to be self-directed, therefore significant periods of group work must be timetabled to ensure active participation. Naturally group work is not individually tailored although the aim is to be inclusive by modifying questions and activities within the group to cater to needs and ability.*
>
> *Definitely not in my program. It's quite realistic to still provide courses geared to client need without compromising good practice. We still operate within flexible, self-paced delivery, focusing on the development of the whole person because that is our strong belief.*
>
> *Everyone is still individual-often generic lesson plan but individual outcomes-but there is pressure to increase NRS level in time frames.*
>
> *It is the principles of good practice which make the whole thing work.*
>
> *Recently both our groups were asked for comments about the program. Key responses: no pressure, no confrontation, helpful teachers, learning what they need to, enjoy group discussions in class and in the breaks.*

It is evident from some of these responses that providers are concerned about maintaining a student-centred approach to classroom activities.

The providers acknowledge that difficulties at Centrelink have been a major factor in the very slow commencement of their programs:

> *The staff admitted the reason they weren't referring was that they didn't know how to put it on the system.*
>
> *I have witnessed staff who are frantically busy, and not appropriately informed.*
>
> *Slow referrals possibly due to lack of experience, knowledge and confidence in identifying and tastefully referring possible clients.*

How should education/training be framed for adult literacy and numeracy participants?

Communication skills, computer literacy, and critical literacy are essential for people to manage the 'new social relationships of work', where effective teamwork is dependent upon both oral and email communication skills (Kalantzis and Cope 1997, 5-6). Neither computer literacy nor critical literacy are privileged in the tender, although all providers have indicated that these literacies are included in their programs. One city-based provider, who returned six student questionnaires, indicates that her students have 'loved' working with computers, while a country-based provider, who returned 17 student questionnaires, states that her clients are 'not motivated' in this area and their behaviour has 'limited' her ability to assist them. Of these 17 country students, seven state that they have no employment goals, two say they are interested in 'any job', six specify employment goals that may not require computing skills

(eg labourer, motor mechanic, hairdresser), and three name careers that may possibly require computing skills (eg army, boilermaker). Of the city-based students, one has no employment goals, two are interested in 'any job', one lists 'retail sales', while the remaining two specify goals that definitely required computing skills (eg accounting, public service). Given the smaller composition of this group, the motivation of some students may encourage others to become keen to develop their skills. In the much larger group, it appears that a significant number of students do not regard computing skills as being relevant to their lives, which has impacted on the lack of progress that the group has made.

Despite the fact that the tender document states 'there will need to be a greater emphasis on oral communication skills development' (DEETYA 1998, 12), reading, writing, and numeracy macro skills are privileged over oral communication in the definition of a successful outcome. Oral communication is an essential component of group work. One of the providers offers this comment:

> *... with each new participant the group dynamics are disrupted, which impacts on group work. Referrals come in dribs and drabs-this naturally has an impact on our ability to work through modules as a group [which is] essential in the workplace. I believe this important aspect has been largely overlooked in the contractual conditions.*

The ALLP companion volume (Dawkins 1991, 41) states that a chief national goal was to continue to reach for the highest levels of literacy achievement to maximise both individual and national potential. The 'back to basics' approach of the LANT literacy program for the unemployed demonstrates an extremely limited construction of 'literate'. It concentrates on the macro skills of reading, writing, and numeracy to the exclusion of other literacies. This is in contrast to the recognition in the ALLP companion volume that literacy development is also influenced by the prevailing technologies like computers and the mass media, which need to be considered in literacy provision (Dawkins 1991, 36).

There is no doubt that we live in an era in which technology is rapidly advancing, but there is considerable debate as to the extent that this will affect every person's chances of employment. On the one hand, there is a call for people to develop technological skills in order to be competitive in the employment market (Kell 1998, 6). On the other, there is doubt about whether all people need to master these skills to be employable. Black (1995, 53-4) questions whether new technology and changes in workplace practices will shut out people with low levels of literacy. He concludes that there are no clear answers because the situation is complex and is dependent upon the requirements of various occupations.

Is there more to life than work? Should not the curriculum offer modules related to health, life skills, use of leisure time, and critical analysis of environmental and social issues? What type of education is most valuable to students – competency-based 'basics', or general humanistic, skills-based job training, or a combination? The following responses from providers suggest that a combination may be most appropriate:

Our local TAFE needs to be able to offer a more holistic learning experience and be willing to give access to workshops to allow students to do some trade modules. Then numeracy/literacy learning could be wrapped around this learning. I have bought local professionals in for sessions on drug and alcohol/anger management, with partial success. Social skills need to develop more for successful development of many aspects of oral communication.

Some participants have great difficulty working in a group due to low self-esteem ... you have a behaviour management rather than a learning program.

Critical literacy, however, has the potential to undermine the ideological interests of government and industry. It could thus be argued that critical literacy is not privileged in the tender because those in power are concerned that its inclusion may affect their ability to maintain society's status quo.

Barclay (1991) suggests that facilitators may have conflicting ideas about what the term 'critical literacy' entails. Two of the providers indicate that critical literacy has been 'difficult' for their students, while another comments that 'critical literacy and future employment would be 30% and 45% of the program respectively'. In hindsight, these responses have taught me to be more explicit. It may have been useful if I had asked providers to supply details about critical literacy activities conducted with their participants. Critical literacy is an area in which all facilitators of adult literacy should be able to access professional development.

Providers offer the following suggestions for improvement of the program:

- classes to commence only when minimum numbers referred are able to start
- bimonthly forum for trainers to share ideas and experiences
- government-funded workshops or video conferencing for new participants to prepare them for study and routine
- much stronger commitment from local Centrelink staff
- more informed and proactive Centrelink staff
- another 12 months added to the tender due to nearly 12 months lost
- provision for participants who are three in one area and one in another and for those who do not make the big leap forward to have another chance.

Clearly, lack of referrals, participants' drifting into the program causing disruptions, and time constraints are areas of major concern for providers.

Participants have their say

The responses from participants to the questionnaire are varied. The city-based respondents include three males and three females. Apart from one Yugoslavian student, who has been living in Australia for three years, they are all Australian born. Only one student has no employment goals.

In response to the statement, 'I believe that it is beneficial for me to participate in this program, and I am happy to do so', two students indicate strong agreement. The remaining four agree with the statement.

In response to the statement, 'I believe that my participation in this program will assist me to achieve my employment goals', one student strongly agrees, three agree, and two are unsure. The provider working with this group offers the following comment:

> *Recently both our groups were asked for comments about the program. Key responses were: no pressure, no confrontation, helpful teachers, learning what they need to, enjoy group discussions in class and in the breaks.*

The comment, 'learning what they need to', appears to express satisfaction about what is offered in the curriculum. This is the group which 'loved' working with computers, so presumably the comment reflects that computer literacy is needed, along with basic literacy/numeracy skills (there is an emphasis on the development of oral skills in this particular program), as well as 'vocation counselling', which is also encouraged.

The country-based group consists of 15 males and two females, all Australian born; three male participants are Aboriginal. Six participants have no employment goals (none of these are Aboriginal).

In response to the statement, 'I believe that it is beneficial for me to participate in this program, and I am happy to do so', three students strongly agree (two of these have no employment goals), ten agree (three of these have no employment goals), two are unsure, one disagrees, and one strongly disagrees (both have no employment goals).

In response to the statement, 'I believe that my participation in this program will assist me to achieve my employment goals', two strongly agree (one has no employment goals), nine agree (three of these have no employment goals), four are unsure, and, surprisingly, only two disagree (neither have employment goals).

Their responses indicate that the majority of these students have a positive attitude towards the program-an outcome that has amazed the provider working with them. The provider states: 'they don't demonstrate this attitude'.

Participants have also been invited to express their feelings about the program and to suggest improvements that could help them to achieve their goals. Only three of the 23 participants have responded to this invitation. The first likes the program because 'it gives me something to do and it will help me to get my grades up'. There is no mention of the program's relationship to employment goals, and it suggests that participation may serve to alleviate the

boredom of unemployment. The second suggests that the program is potentially helpful because 'it gives me a semi-regular commitment within which to achieve the goals of this course, ie to improve my numerical skills and other skills that I may need assistance with'. This student appears to have competent literacy skills and is probably one of those students which a provider describes as having Year 12/University standard for English, but NRS 1 for numeracy. The third suggests that more 'hands on stuff' is necessary '[i]nstead of just sitting at a table ... reading of paper all the time'. This comment reinforces the need for participants to be offered skills-based job training as part of their LANT program.

The majority of students who have responded to the questionnaire feel that their participation in the program will assist them to achieve their employment goals. This is surprising, given that the program does little to help them to develop specific skills needed for specific jobs and, to date, the government has not been entirely successful in creating employment for young people.

Conclusion: insights and suggestions

Throughout this research project, there have been numerous examples of how the explicit 'economic rationalistic' approach of the Federal Howard Liberal-Coalition Government to the mandatory literacy/numeracy program for the unemployed has shifted away from the vision for literacy in the Australian Language and Literacy Policy of 1991 in which 'measures to provide access for adults to literacy and numeracy programs were explicitly addressed' (McKenna 1999).

It is clear that the current literacy 'crisis' is a result of a lack of government funding for disadvantaged students rather than the personal deficit of these students, which is implied in government rhetoric. While the government is to be applauded for providing funding for literacy/numeracy programs in primary schools, there is an urgent need for more funding for adult learning, especially in light of the ABS survey. One TAFE institute of which I am aware, for example, has 70 people on the waiting list to join CPE/IVEC classes, but cannot accommodate them due to lack of funding. No doubt other institutes have similar stories. All adults in need of assistance should be offered support, not simply those whom the government targets for mandatory literacy/numeracy training because it suits their ideological purposes.

I have argued that a major criticism of the current mandatory literacy/numeracy program is that it focuses on a single literacy-competency in the reading, writing, and numeracy macro skills, which are privileged in the definition of a 'successful outcome'. If this program is to truly address the needs of the unemployed, policy advisers should validate the inclusion of a number of literacies by equally privileging them. In particular, oral face-to-face communication skills, computer literacy, and critical literacy have been identified as essential literacies to which participants require access. I suggest further that there is also a concomitant need for providers to access professional development, especially to develop a cohesive approach to the teaching of

critical literacy and to assist the development of critical literacy activities that are relevant and empowering to students.

The underlying question pertaining to curriculum is what education is most valuable? There is a perceived need for unemployed people to develop skills that are relevant to employment as a matter of urgency. The development of skills related to employment is important. Skills related to citizenship and personal well-being are, however, of equal importance. Consequently, I have argued for the inclusion in the curriculum of critical literacy and modules related to health, life skills, the environment, and use of leisure time, which would broaden the currently narrow deployment of literacy in the government's policy.

The question of the privileging of computer literacy is an area of curriculum, I suggest, which requires some attention from policy advisors. In the third section of this paper, I have reviewed whether all people required computing/technological skills in order to be employable. It appears that not all people do require these skills for the workplace. One provider has indicated that she finds it difficult to teach computing skills to participants who appear to see no personal relevance in learning them. I would suggest, however, that as technology continues to race ahead, those without basic computing skills will become increasingly marginalised. Consequently, as a matter of policy, participants in adult literacy/numeracy programs should be encouraged to develop basic computing skills.

The most pressing concerns of providers about the current tender arrangements appear to be:

- the time limitations within which a 'successful outcome' can be achieved because this disadvantages some students
- the disruption to group dynamics (and consequently individual progress) caused by students drifting into the program at intervals
- the very late start to the program due to Centrelink problems.

It would appear reasonable to extend the period of tender to compensate for the delay of up to 12 months that some providers have experienced. If the government is to support a quality education for adults then consideration should be given to extension of the time period in which a successful outcome can be achieved in particular circumstances and to regulation of student intakes so that minimal disruption occurs in classes. A 'successful outcome' could also be extended to include student articulation into further areas of study, as was the case with SIP.

Finally, if literacy/numeracy training can be combined with apprenticeship training to address the literacy requirements of employment and citizenship, some of the stigma that some participants feel in the current mandatory program will be removed. The issue of the literacy and numeracy needs of older people (both employed and unemployed) remains, however, it is an area which requires urgent government consideration as the Mutual Obligation Initiative becomes established.

9 Researching Mutual Obligation and literacy: What does this research tell us?

Sheilagh Kelly and Liz Campbell

Introduction

In this project, ALNARC's aims have been twofold: to investigate aspects of effective literacy, language, and numeracy (LLN) provision for groups with special needs and to encourage practitioner research in order to stimulate debate about changes to LLN provision under the Mutual Obligation Initiative, which has seen the introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy Training (LANT) program. A concern is that practitioners' voices have become backgrounded in the changing climate of government policy development, which applies free market principles to LLN provision. The collection pulls together some interesting practitioner research that creatively examines and critiques the government's explicit aim for this program of improving access to training and/or jobs for the groups targeted by the initiative.

The findings are neither uniformly positive nor negative about the impact of this initiative or the LANT program on the lives of the people for whom it has been designed. Each research paper highlights quite specific issues that question the effectiveness of aspects of both the initiative and the program in the light of their intended outcomes. The research projects do demonstrate the immense creativity that is engendered between teachers and students when faced with what seem like impossible odds. Together they have been able to forge working relationships that meet many of the students' needs. Nevertheless, job training schemes have limited value if the regional economic infrastructure cannot sustain levels of employment assumed by current policy. Job training and job creation go hand-in-hand and should be accorded equal importance.

This concluding chapter briefly reviews the findings of the research projects and highlights some of the issues and concerns to emerge. We then briefly consider some of the implications for provision that arise from these research projects.

Review of practitioner research findings

The findings from Chapter Two, 'Voices of the unemployed', and Chapter Three, 'The all-seeing eye' cannot be enumerated quantitatively. The voices in these chapters represent distinctly different profiles-a mid-twenties, English-speaking worker with no post-school education or training and a highly qualified, academic worker, in his mid-thirties, also of English-speaking background. In the context of the LANT program's placement in the Mutual Obligation Initiative, these profiles powerfully demonstrate the assumption of providers that

the uses of literacy will correspond to the imagined needs of the target client groups (China and Robbins 1996, 158). This is not to argue against the need for ongoing access to literacy and numeracy training but demonstrates that it should be placed within broader, long-term, vocational or educational goals.

Chapter Two reflects on the problems facing TAFE teachers due to lack of time and resources to be able to personalise their interactions with students adequately to provide the kind of 'safety net' that assists marginalised students. The space and time to reflect that practitioner research provides has facilitated that kind of interaction in this instance of research for Patrick Gurr and has enabled some important needs associated with the student's background to come to the fore – needs that impact on how the LANT program can effectively assist this student.

The analysis of Centrelink documents and reflection on personal experience reported by Michael Chin in Chapter Three reveals the inadequacies of the skills-based model of literacy on which the Mutual Obligation Initiative is premised. The model is shown here as a punitive, deficit model, which attributes all responsibility for redressing the problem of unemployment to individuals and omits acknowledgment of the structural and systemic nature of the changes to work that are also part of the 'problem' of unemployment.

In Chapter Four, Sue Frischke focuses on the way in which young, unemployed, LANT students on Youth Allowance have responded to literacy and numeracy teaching and the challenges to her teaching that she has had to address in the process. She argues that LANT provision under the Mutual Obligation Initiative for unemployed youth offers basic tools in literacy, numeracy, oral expression, and problem solving but does not address the development of personal and social skills as part of that training. One of the challenges for LANT provision for these students, who have a common background of poor attendance and disruptive behaviour both at school and subsequently in the LANT classes, is the integration of literacy and numeracy training with vocational skills training to render the LANT course more relevant to these young jobseekers. Issues like timetabling, group size, and course content have had to be addressed to adapt the program and to incorporate greater flexibility and negotiated learning in order to counter the high risk of student withdrawal. Although the program has had limitations, Frischke recounts some success in maintaining student interest and involvement.

In Chapter Five, findings from Pauline O'Maley's research into stakeholders' experiences demonstrate positive learning experiences in the classrooms under investigation, including flexibility, individualised learning plans, small groups, positive teacher-student relationships, and treatment like an adult. These characteristics have long been recognised as fundamental to successful programs for adults seeking 'second chance education'.

These positive findings are offset by a series of structural and systemic constraints and negative impacts on different stakeholders that call into question the viability of the program:

- the restricted nature of the reportable outcomes
- the counter-productive effect of the compulsory nature of the training
- the de-professionalisation of teachers, which has resulted from the tendering process, verification, and administration of the program
- lack of adequate provision for youth in LANT
- constraints of implementing LANT by distance.

The findings confirm the need to locate literacy and numeracy training within broader long-term vocational goals rather than to treat them in isolated skills development courses. The position of LANT within the Mutual Obligation Initiative's range of activities is based on a common but unworkable notion of literacy (and numeracy) as a generic set of skills that can be taught in isolation from the broader social, cultural, and vocational contexts in which they arise.

John Stone's research findings, presented in Chapter Six, also support the approach that LANT teaching must go beyond basic literacy and numeracy skills for employment purposes to include social literacies. He argues that the social gains made by these students, their recognition of their strengths, and the resultant increased self-esteem have been as important as the acquisition of more practical skills that are recognised by the LANT program. In addition, Stone argues for a broader definition of literacy in the program that includes literacies possessed by this student group, such as graphic literacy and computer literacy. The findings of Chapter Six suggest that it is important to relate the training content to a wider range of skills and competencies than are demanded by industry in order to enhance the employment opportunities of the students.

Philippa Granwal's findings in Chapter Seven confirm anecdotal evidence of the practice by some private Job Network agencies of failing to pay public training providers for the language, literacy, and numeracy tuition of their clients. This finding highlights limitations in the accountability processes between the Federal Government, private training providers, and, in this case, a State-funded education provider in the form of a TAFE institute. In effect, these limitations have led to a situation in which the TAFE provider, which operates within tightening budget constraints, 'subsidises' a private provider supposedly funded at the federal level. This practice points to a more serious question about the true cost of providing literacy and numeracy training within the Mutual Obligation Initiative. If Job Network agencies are not covering the costs for the training they contract to provide, it is imperative to ask why not. Is it because their funds are inadequate or because they are 'profiting' by using an existing public service? Reports from teachers at other case study sites about casualised hourly pay rates and poorly resourced centres would suggest the former. These findings call for clarification of federal-State funding responsibilities and the need to ascertain the real costs of effective literacy and numeracy training in the post-secondary vocational sector.

Sarah Lindfield-Ide's research findings, in Chapter Eight, suggests that the assumptions underpinning the government's policy development of mandatory literacy/numeracy training require scrutiny and critique. She argues that the

Federal Government's position that there is a literacy crisis is part of a trend in Western countries undergoing economic rationalisation and industrial reform to shift attention from systemic causes of unemployment and gaps in job provision and to place the responsibility for employment onto individuals. Her findings indicate the need for a coherent national literacy and numeracy policy, which is linked to initiatives in employment, training, and general education and reinforce the call for a broadening of the spectrum of literacies.

Implications for the future

As the review of the research findings shows, many of the projects have identified similar issues and concerns, which have implications both for future provision and research directions.

The LANT program

One of the most common concerns reported by all stakeholder groups is the compulsory nature of the LANT training. It appears to have a flow-on effect throughout the program. These effects include, among others, motivation of students, the struggle to create relevant curricula, the new promotional and policing roles of teachers, and the complexity of relations between educational providers and Centrelink staff. There appears to be little evidence from these research sites (nor from accepted practices of adult education) to support the compulsory nature of the program.

Another area of serious concern raised by the projects relates to provision for youth. Youth are the group originally targeted for LANT and constitute the majority of clients at the sites investigated by these research projects. Many of the students report 'selecting' the LANT option for a mutual obligation activity only because there have been no other options. Teachers speak of the struggle to create meaningful courses for youth. The problem of creating relevant curricula does not necessarily reflect on those curricula but, rather, highlights the broader needs of young people for whom LANT is designed. The following issues have been identified as the most important of any labour market program for enhancing young people's employment prospects and self-esteem:

- choice
- supervision
- links to ongoing job opportunities
- building on existing skills and aspirations
- accredited and recognised training
- adequate income
- post-placement assistance
- attunement to the needs of individuals (McClelland et al 1998, 118).

All practitioner researchers acknowledge the importance of developing the social and personal skills of students, given the high incidence of dysfunctional family backgrounds and problems experienced with authorities, such as the police or the

education system. In addition, some teachers have experimented with integrating interpersonal skills development with vocational skills training to ensure the relevance of the content to their students and to address some of the attendance problems that they have encountered.

Another common issue is concern that the government's definition of literacy in the LANT program is too limited, concentrating as it does on 'back to basics' reading, writing, and numeracy, while it ignores alternative competencies possessed by many students, such as graphics literacy, and other forms of literacy, such as critical literacy, oral communication skills, computer literacy, and the development of interpersonal social skills.

Responses by teachers to these kinds of limitations include modifications to the national curriculum and to teaching methods by moving out of the classroom and engaging their students in activities that are relevant to their aspirations and/or needs. Timetabling has been negotiated to encourage participation. There also seems to have been an effort to maintain or move towards smaller learning groups to cater to students' needs and goals more effectively and to develop positive attitudes to learning despite the compulsory nature of the LANT program.

All the practitioner researchers recognise that the alleged literacy 'crisis' is a political solution to a systemic problem that results from economic and industrial restructuring. No amount of literacy and numeracy training can guarantee employment. The main obstacle to meeting students' needs is the absence of a sufficiently strong employment infrastructure. Furthermore, the research projects indicate that there is a gap between the rhetoric of ongoing participation in civil society and the reality of developing these skills incrementally where funding structures work against the notion of ongoing development.

Despite these limitations, the commitment of LANT teachers to their students has meant that many students have derived more from these programs than they ever gained from school.

Issues affecting provision

The success of a LANT program, particularly in regions with a fragile infrastructure and a low demand for goods and services, is heavily dependent on support from the community. Support may come from businesses, for example, in the form of provision of equipment or opportunities for training.

The research projects identify the difficulties associated with providing LANT programs by distance. All the challenges in respect of youth provision are exacerbated in the reports from distance teachers. The often complex, multi-faceted, social as well as vocational and educational needs of young people in isolated rural towns cannot be met totally by distance provision. The research suggests that young people need a teacher/trainer with as much local knowledge as possible and opportunity for some face-to-face contact during a program.

Another serious concern articulated by participating teachers is the

isolation and breakdown of the collegial and professional support that they have experienced in the past. LANT providers indicate that they have had to take on additional non-academic roles, including liaison with Centrelink agencies and the promotion and policing of LANT provision. Teachers indicate that the formal stressful process of verification of their students' work is made more burdensome because contact with those responsible for verification is indirect. While the changed education landscape of economic imperatives, competitiveness, deregulation of the training market, and competitive tendering are not confined to LANT, the implementation of this program appears to have hastened a weakening of the professional culture. This breaking down of a cohesive professional body seems all the more wasteful because it comes so close upon a decade that has seen government policy and practice acknowledge and support the role and professional development of adult literacy/numeracy teachers.

It is important, therefore, to recognise that the teachers in LANT programs also have training needs and to improve their conditions. Teachers' commitment to their programs and/or to their research projects has, at times, been sorely tried by a range of pressures:

- casualisation of their working conditions
- the open animosity of some of their colleagues to the goals of their research projects
- lack of technical infrastructure support, such as computers, in community literacy programs
- the grafting of a 'free market' model of constant competitiveness and insecurity onto an education system that is attempting to meet the needs of those trying to stay out of the ranks of a growing underclass.

Evaluation of LANT

At the time of publication, the LANT program has been in operation for almost two years. Findings from these case studies and from other research on effective, labour market training indicate the need for critical evaluation of this program in the light of its stated aims and the broader national goals for vocational education and training. This evaluation needs to focus on several key issues.

One key issue that needs evaluation is the tracking of outcomes for clients longitudinally and qualitatively by looking at client articulation into jobs or further education and training. A particular focus on outcomes for young people in the program is necessary. The present narrow focus on measuring reportable outcomes in terms of National Reporting System (NRS) levels offers short-term, limited indicators of success.

A second key issue that requires evaluation involves the funding abilities of providers. If the present structure of the LANT program is confirmed, it is imperative to ensure that tender costings demonstrate a capacity to fund the following:

- teacher liaison/coordination hours for the additional roles in respect of

Centrelink liaison, the verification process, and other reporting procedures
- adequate pedagogical resources (eg computers, library audio and video resources)
- appropriately trained and remunerated teachers
- local program provision for isolated rural centres wherever possible in preference to provision completely at a distance.

A third key issue that needs evaluation involves some of the legal dimensions of LANT provision. Within the present structure of the program, it is important to ensure the following in relation to Job Network agencies:

- a legal requirement to provide comprehensive initial assessments of their case-managed clients who require English language/literacy training
- a legal requirement to pay the training authority for training provided to their clients.

It is suggested that failure to meet either of these proposed legal requirements should be grounds for non-renewal of Job Network contracts by the government.

Conclusion

Overall, these research projects mark an important point in developing a more visible culture of research in the Australian adult literacy, language, and numeracy field. They point to the need for investigation and documentation of innovative, comprehensive labour market programs both in Australia and elsewhere. Of particular interest for future research are programs that include inter-agency collaboration in delivery and that integrate literacy/numeracy training with other long-term vocational training.

It may also be useful to replicate the kind of research included in this collection in order for practitioners in the field to be able to make generalisations about the successes and constraints evident in these projects.

It is apparent that the learning achieved in these projects is not confined to learners enrolled in programs. Teachers and research mentors have also learnt much about the challenges involved in developing successful examples of policy and provision. The projects have also provided an important point of contact for educators and industry/community groups to share their understandings about literacy, language, and numeracy learning. These achievements are equally important in building a strong and proactive tradition of Australian knowledge about learning in this field.

Appendix 1: questionnaires sent to providers and participants

Dear Provider,

As I explained in my initial phone call to you, I am currently working on a professional development paper for a Master of Education Studies Degree. I am hoping to discover:

(i) the views of providers about the mutual obligation literacy/numeracy program

(ii) a clear picture (as clear as can possibly be gained via a questionnaire) about what is happening in the 'learning exchange' between providers and participants in the Mutual Obligation literacy/numeracy program.

Thank you for agreeing to assist me-I am sincerely appreciative. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries/concerns about this questionnaire.

I would appreciate a reply (mail or fax) by Monday 31 May in order to adhere to the timeline for completion of this project.

My phone/fax number is

My postal address is

Sincere thanks once again,

Sarah Lindfield-Ide

1. When did your first intake of students occur? How many students are currently enrolled with you?

2. What is your relationship with Centrelink? Have you experienced problems in commencing your program that are directly related to Centrelink? If so, please outline briefly.

3. What is the general attitude of participants when they are initially referred to you? Has your agency faced any difficulties with motivation and behaviour?

4. What has been the most constructive aspect of this tender program?

5. Some agencies have expressed concerns about some constraints of the mutual obligation tender program. Please comment if any of the following have been issues for your agency?

   External moderation

   Linkage of final payment with measurable outcomes

   Set outcomes locked into a time frame

6. Given these constraints, how realistic is it for you to design courses 'related to clients needs' as specified on page 6 of the tender?
Do you feel that 'good practice' for teaching adult students is compromised in any way? (eg Are participants able to define their individual learning objectives and take increasing responsibility for their learning? Is there a leaning towards an 'I teach, you listen' approach?)

7. Please comment on the extent to which the following are addressed in your program:
   - development of oral skills
   - computer literacy
   - critical literacy
   - relevance of program to future employment of each participant.

8. Can you suggest three improvements to the LANT program?
   (1)
   (2)
   (3)

9. Do you have any other comments that you would like to make that express your feelings towards the tender or which enable me to gain as clear an insight as a questionnaire will allow into what is happening in your 'learning exchange' with participants?

Dear participant in the mutual obligation literacy/numeracy program,

I am a university student who is working on a project about mutual obligation. I would be grateful if you could spare me a few minutes to answer the following questions: it would greatly assist my research.

1. Are you male/female? (Cross out that which does not apply).

2. Tick the box that applies to you:

   ☐ Born in Australia

   ☐ Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander

   ☐ Born in another country

   Name of country _____

   Number of years living in Australia _____

3. How long have you been participating in this program?

   _____

4. Do you have employment goals? If so, please briefly explain.

   _____

   _____

5. Read the following statements, then circle the response which best applies to you:

   I believe that it is beneficial for me to participate in this program and I am happy to do so.

   strongly agree agree unsure disagree strongly disagree

   I believe that my participation in this program will assist me to achieve my employment goals

   strongly agree agree unsure disagree strongly disagree

6. Please feel free to use the back of this page to write out your feelings regarding this program. Do you have suggestions for improvements to the program which could help you to achieve your goals?

Thank you for assisting me with my study.

Sarah

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